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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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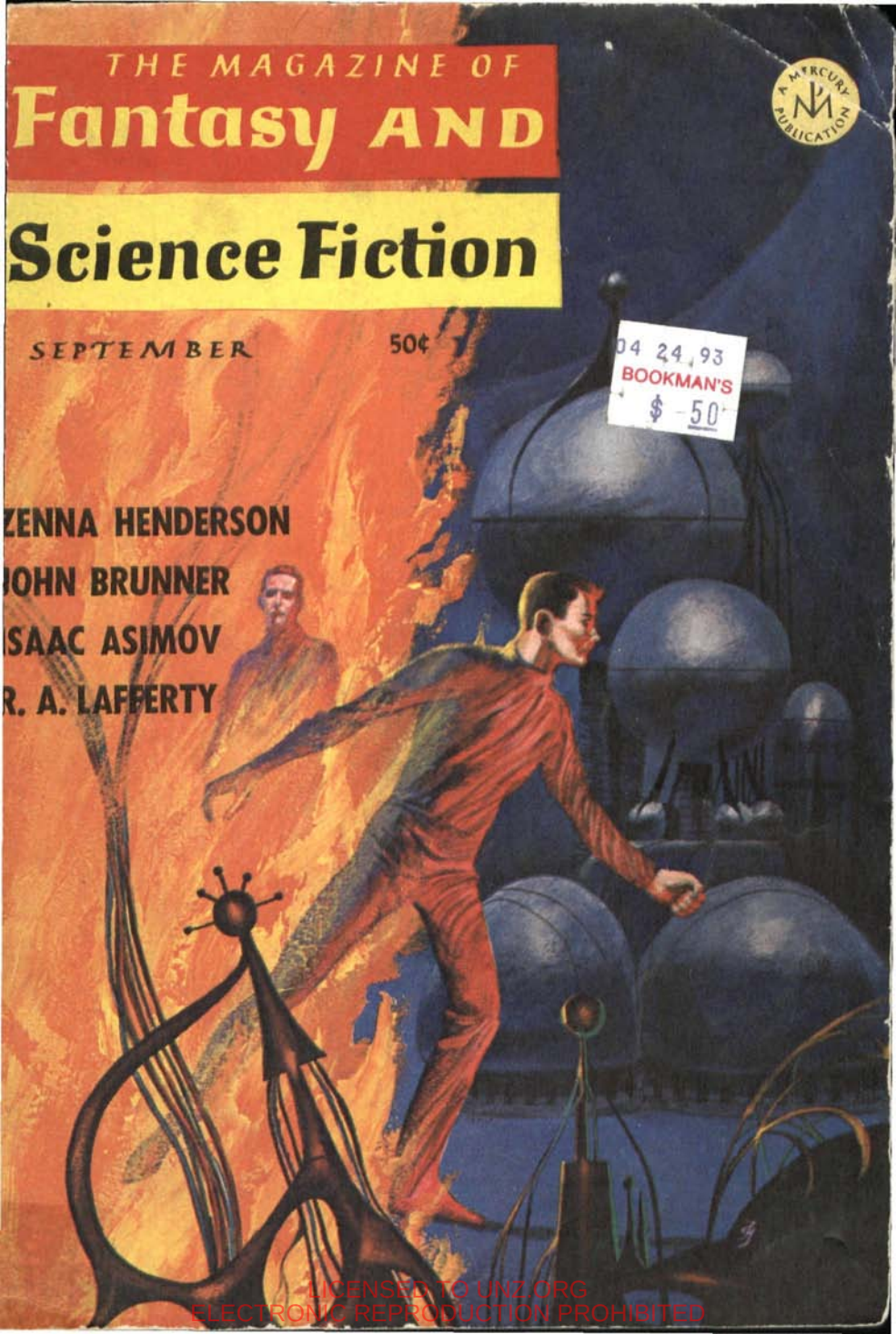

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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When science fiction is at its best, it conceives a perfect story out of the inconceivable; a story which has interior logic, which says something about the human situation and which contains a minimum of contrivance no matter how startling the concept. Here's a perfect example, a wryly humorous closeup of a remarkable by-product of a Gemini flight—and its odd but appropriate effects upon the two men who share in its discovery.

LUANA

by Gilbert Thomas

AFTER A DAY OF MYCOLOGY—MY specialty—I would turn to painting, to sculpture. Cutting women out of my life—I had been hurt enough. Art, life's shadow, is not a good substitute, but it would have to do. I'd begun by painting water colors of fungi. Nothing is so lovely as spring lichen spreading across the face of crisp rock, cracking it into sand. Fungi shattering the Parthenon into chips of marble has never failed to amaze me with its power. Thus does beauty become soil.

It was after losing my first wife that I turned to sculpture. Although I had captured the loveliness of Monascus purpureas on canvas, and my shaggymanes in tempura—guarded against decay by infusions of deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA, without which life cannot exist—had been purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York for their files.

I wanted to get my hands on something big. Although my first wife had not been large, nor my second. Little women in fact, docile as the gentle morel, delicious fried in butter or added to soups. Evidently they found me more docile still, interested only in my work. That the lowly ubiquitous Penicillium had saved millions and blue cheese gave them no cause to rejoice. They didn't care that man's journey into the expanding universe of the mind is powered by diethylamide tartrate of D-lysergic acid—LSD-25—rooted in ergot, fungus.

My first wife screwed up her

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courage to the point of calling me moldy. "You moldy bastard," she said one morning over coffee and figs. I had taken to eating fruit for breakfast after my latest trip to Europe and found it suited my system. "Moldy fig!" our daughter Priscilla shot from the next room —she'd been put up to it, a fat little girl, clinically speaking. Then Elva had gone to the cookie jar and pulled out a sack of glazed doughnuts; and defiantly dumping them on the table was about to eat one when she noticed—may God strike me dead—they were moldy. Bursting into tears she ran from the room screaming: *"You did it—you did it!"* I hadn't, of course. The fact is: spore is all around us, ready to feed on anything. Basidiomycetes will feed on solid plastic, changing it into sugar. Elva had waited too long to make her move and the hyphae had taken over.

Picasso is a good sculptor. (A man must have his heroes—particularly when depressed.) I've always enjoyed his goat, created at Vallouris in the 50s, using a multiplicity of materials. Whatever came to hand. Wire, plaster, fruit crates. Finished, he discovered something was missing: the genitalia. His remedy—take an old tin can, flatten it and double it back on itself, then insert it in the moist plaster just below the stiff upturned tail and protruding gaspipe. Daring. I like to think I model myself on that Picasso.

My second wife, the Greek, was dark and dainty but she turned up one morning black and blue. She had taken to staying out overnight without my permission and I had noticed bruises and what appeared to be the marks of teeth on her from time to time. These occurred most usually about the throat with some finding their way down to the breast. Pressed for an explanation she would say she refused to wear glasses and had run into something. When I said it was more likely something had run into her, she asked for a divorce. I didn't remember her as being nearsighted. At the little quayside cafe at Piraeus she had seen well enough. Well enough to come over and ask: "Aren't you Doctor Raymond Kelpe, the famous mycologist from the United States?" When I said I was, she blushed, saying she was interested in molds herself, was in fact an advanced student specializing in torula as it pertains to cracking oil into food—petro-proteins—at the University of Athens; had actually seen me in lecture and knew I was in town to help save the Parthenon. Which still may be possible; often of a morning I've joined the little workman there on the Acropolis, his cup of cement helping us restore the chips to their historic position.

Pallas became my assistant, warning me to beware of the "I love you, *kiss*—ing" girls of Ath-

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ens; and to make sure that I did, seduced me. It was simple in the laboratory, for I often work late. We were among the trays of saprophytes, which had just hatched—you could actually see the little *champignons* rise from their beds of crushed acorn, dead leaves, and coffee grounds lightly laced with *merde*. There in the moist scented air—for the little tan fruit has a delicious odor—she reached for a retort and fainted. Falling on a soft bed of mushrooms six feet long. Her laboratory dress, buttoned down the front, was somewhat askew, and as I bent to lend mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, she moaned.

We were married; and it was soon after arriving back in the United States that I noticed she was spending more and more time away from me—in the company of Dr. Gilroy Mannfried, doing research in parasurgery in Building 29. I am in building 28. Although still my assistant, Pallas said she was sick of it and wanted to go back to Greece where the light was right, that she was only 18 and fungi had been a passing thing of youth. That she was now more interested in parasurgery, and stuck her tongue out at me. Until now she had been docile, kind—I didn't like to see my wife chewed up. I couldn't help thinking Dr. Mannfried had given her something—dexamyl or the like. And I found myself getting sleepy too early in the evening—8 or 9—sleeping like the dead at 10 or 11. I wouldn't have put it past them to be slipping me a little chloral hydrate. Love will find a way. No one knows better than a doctor that the Oath of Hippocrates is as outdated as the general practitioner. Once I thought I heard her scream but couldn't rouse myself from my stupor; it was possible they had invaded my bedroom for added thrills.

I returned to sculpture, experimenting after the manner of Picasso, using bread as the basic material; malleable, sprayed with plastic, a variety of textures and colors was possible, whole wheat to white to rye and pumpernickel, the whole allowed to overrun with algae to give a patina of age. I was invited to display in the patio of the Los Angeles County Art Museum, drawing much good comment among the works of Giacometti, Rueben Nakian and Peter Volkos. My work was impervious to the weather and this being a modern era no one found fault with my using bread as the basis for a work of art. Tempura, after all, being egg.

And I still had to do my job. Gemini 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. Trickier and more complex every year. One of these bitches was going to cause me to blow a gasket.

Pallas showed up one Wednesday morning bleeding about the cheek. She now had enough of all

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Americans and was returning to Greece immediately via—so help me—the Far East where she hoped to gain some peace of mind through an examination of their religions. I was to give her passage. And, oddly, she now used Elva's nasty remark, exactly. If fungi is my jugular, Greece was hers. I called her a name and was immediately sorry; I believe in integration. That's Italian, she said, and stuck out her tongue. What a beauty, crying, bleeding, her clothes torn and her tongue sticking out. My last young girl. I had to give her her freedom, but not before talking to Dr. Mannfried. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, licking his lips. He was a big bastard, like lots of them are with the knife. They look like butchers but can thread a needle with their thumbs. "I hardly know your wife," he said, "but I'll say this for her—I admire your taste, she's delicious."

I wanted to hit the big son-of-a-bitch, but what would that prove. I needed my hands for my work as much as he needed his.

"Yes, isn't she," I said, and went to the market to buy all their second-day bread. I'd have to keep busy, now that I would be alone.

Oddly, Dr. Mannfried seemed drawn to me after Pallas left for Hong Kong. He enjoyed talking about her, the bastard; even mentioning my first wife made his mouth water, although he hadn't made a pass at her because that was before his son had graduated from college and he said he'd taken a solemn oath in his youth not to screw up his life until his boy was 21. I'm not much of a talker, but I'm a good listener—and I listened as I patted sandwich loaf into patterns of desire. I kept sculpting women; it was a compulsion.

What happened next was magnificent, and almost cleared my mind. Man's first walk in space. (Actually the second, after the USSR.) As usual, I had been called to the Cape to head the decontamination and sterilization crew, getting Gemini 4 ready for space. The planets must not be a dumping ground for human waste. This was drill—preparation for our coming flight to the moon. After Gemini 4 all my space flights would be *etc.*—all my systems were *go*. But I didn't know it then.

The microorganisms carried by a single astronaut—any man—total approximately 10^{12}, 10 followed by 12 zeros. I cleaned up our boys, using ethylene oxide gas on the capsule to spare the components. Everything shipshape and clean as a whistle. But when they opened the hatch in stellar space . . . something was coming the other way.

I found spore. There was no doubt about it, and only one. It was impossible at that height—it

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couldn't be one of ours. It had been sucked into the capsule vacuum-cleaner in space, after the hatch had been resecured. That space is filled with more than nothing—anti-matter matter and the like—this we know: but *spore.*

I took it to my laboratory—home—by jet toward an optimum environment; and perhaps selfishly told no one about it.

I had no idea what food it would take. I gave it a loaf of bread and stood back to wait. Was it alive?

It had withstood the all but absolute temperature of space; it had withstood the devastating effects of radiation—it might prove a mutation of its original form on another planet.

I confess, I fell asleep watching the load of rye bread on its emulsion of fungi-free earth. I'd been up since the discovery—and sleep is a protective device against sustained excitement. Perhaps it hadn't been chloral hydrate. It was quiet in the laboratory, a single overhead light on the experiment. I had even cut off the Muzak the President feels will ease our progress. It must have been ten o'clock; it was dawn when I awoke.

My God, it was huge! I'd never seen anything like it. At first I thought it was a tree, the trunk was three feet through. It was six feet tall, of a perfect symmetry, a ruff under its chin and the most beautiful mushroom I had ever seen. A creamy off-white, its cap a brilliant orange flecked with chaste white dots. The bread was gone and it was feeding on earth and the wood surrounding it. I ran to my quarters off the laboratory, where I do my sculpture, returning to bank loaves of bread around the trunk. It rejected them, having taken its full growth. Such texture! What *tournedos aux champignons* it would make! This mushroom would make me famous! But now I couldn't reveal my secret; we're supposed to tell NASA everything; to hell with NASA. This was one triumph I could enjoy privately. I didn't need the roll of drums and a wire from Stockholm. I touched its flesh. That it might eat me crossed my mind, but where work is concerned I am not passive. I squeezed it. It was warm, soft and giving, like a girl's trunk. I put my arms around it—what a baby! I kissed it and the odor was sweet and sophisticated as some mushrooms. Even here on earth. Now this one was on earth and it was mine. But would it spore? Go inky or blow away as so much of our dew-raised fungi spores to blow away, sight unseen in some forgotten pasture? No. The second and even the third day found it standing firm but undulating slightly in the morning air. I had taken the mushroom across campus to my home, for the sake of privacy and experiment. It was

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surprisingly light, no heavier than a girl. But then the world's record yield of mushrooms per square foot is only 7.35 pounds.

Its flesh seemed alive, palpitant—I'm no pantheist, yet I've often felt that plants, trees, flowers, have a life we know nothing of. I left the window open to let it breathe. The curtains moved gently with the breeze and my mushroom would softly sway.

Where in hell had it come from? That there was some form of life on other planets, now we knew. I knew. Well, others would find out in time. Now the experiments could begin. Had to begin. I was a scientist, after all, and had to do it. I had to cut. I didn't know what to expect, so gingerly, gingerly, I approached it, knife in hand, waited, then slipped it in.

It seemed to sigh, but perhaps it was my imagination. It cut nicely. What lovely texture! Like a young girl's thighs. Soft and perfectly grained.

I took a leave of absence from the university; and as the days went by carved more deeply into Lulu. I had now given her a name, after the manner of weather bureaus with hurricanes. Lulu. It seemed a good name for a tanned girl, perhaps a fine mulatto, a girl from the islands, Polynesia—what skin! Luana. Good-bye, Lulu—you are Luana. Aloha—which also means Hello. I couldn't place her in the known world of mushrooms, but that didn't surprise me—and then I left off experimenting, removing my sculpturing tools from Building 28, bringing them home to really go to work. What a figure! It was no trouble at all, she almost carved herself, orange giving way to pale pink-and-gold making flowers in her hair. I swear it was as though she was *there,* although she never spoke—I hadn't gone that far—nor did I speak to her: there are limits. I didn't know whether to leave clothes on her. Or not. But I was never one to go along with that misguided Pope painting diapers on Michelangelo's cupids. I carved her whole and I carved her nude. No abstraction—who wants the portrait of a loved one in abstraction? I'd rather have a photograph. Take my word for it, I'm a good sculptor—the Venus de Milo: that's my sort of thing. Only lighter, more slender, more docile. I knew Luana was docile—perhaps she was Japanese, a sweet Japanese girl lisping syllables I would never understand, little Miss Suke, and that was the day Dr. Mannfried walked in unannounced.

The dirty bastard just stood there, sucking in his breath and staring at Luana. He was stricken. I'd done better than I knew. But then, I was inspired. "My God," he said, "what is it?"

"Just a statue," I said.

"I'd swear it was alive."

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"Don't stand too close."

"Why not?"

"She might bite you."

He had the grace to blush; I never thought I'd ever see a surgeon blush. He wanted to touch Luana, but I led him into the patio, rubbing mushroom off my hands. I even had her in my hair. I stopped wiping her off; somehow it seemed a sacrilege. Her flesh was only slightly moist, pleasantly taut, excellent for subtlety with the knife. Dr. Mannfried picked a piece from my hair and stupidly said, ". . . it's springy."

"Yes," I said, "isn't it."

"What is it?"

"What's what?"

"What material are you using?"

"A new plastic."

"Oh."

But I could see he didn't believe me. And then I made the mistake of saying:

"I'd prefer you didn't tell anyone about this."

He smiled that rapacious smile; he had something on his mind. I knew I shouldn't have trusted the big bastard.

"You can trust me," said Dr. Mannfried.

He came every day to see Luana. And oddly enough, to my knowledge, he did keep his word —no one mentioned Luana or asked what I was doing on holiday.

When there was no breeze I would turn on the fans, two oscillating twelve inchers I had bought for the purpose, placing one on each side of her. I would play "Sweet Leilani" on the hi-fi, "Bali H'ai", and watch her move to the music—a lovely nymph from some lost planet, perhaps now gone from the universe, a billion years ago, for spore is immortal. Almost. Raise the temperature of earth but a few degrees and she would take over the world. My beautiful dancing mushroom, Luana.

I kept her shored with cupcakes in case she wanted to eat; it was impossible to know at what moment she might die. I thought of covering her with moist cloth, but she seemed moist enough and I didn't want to run the risk of fungi forming, fungi on fungi, it would only seem humorous to someone who had never seen Luana. And yet something was missing and I knew what it was. Being shy, I just couldn't do it. But Dr. Mannfried could. Earthy bastard.

"She hasn't got that thing," said Dr. Mannfried. He'd been observing her closely for some minutes. He moved one of the fans and changed the record. We were both sharing her now, there was no way to shut him out, persistent swine.

"No, my friend," said Dr. Mannfried, "you are a great sculptor, but she hasn't got that thing."

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I still hadn't allowed him to touch her.

"That's my department," said Dr. Mannfried.

Remembering Picasso and the goat, I felt an inadequacy that goes beyond belief. That full-blooded Spaniard could do it, but not me. I had even considered draping her with a pareau, a little one, about the hips. Dr. Mannfried was right. I had to let him have his way.

"I've taken a lot of them out," he said, "but this is the first time I've ever put one in," and he was sweating, even with the fans on, his eyes beady.

"Now?" I asked.

"Now," he said.

"Can . . . I watch?"

"No, it'll be better if you wait outside."

"You'll be careful . . ."

"Please, I know my business."

"How long will it be, Doctor?"

"I'll let you know when it's over. There's nothing to worry about." And taking my smallest, sharpest knife, he started for Luana. His eyes never left her and his hand was shaking.

I must have walked the floor for 10—15 minutes, smoking cigarette after cigarette, which isn't like me—up and down outside that door—letting Dr. Mannfried do what I should have done. It was his sudden scream that sent me hurtling into the room of my beloved. Dr. Mannfried was hanging on her, torn by ecstasy, his teeth buried deep in her neck.

I'll never know how I got through the next few hours. I tried patching her throat with brown bread, but it wasn't the same. I didn't turn on the fans or play the music that night.

It was sometime after midnight when I received the call from my colleague Dr. Shih. He told me to come over to Dr. Mannfried's house at once, that this was an emergency. Oddly, I still believe in Hippocrates, and so I went, to be met at the door by a wide-eyed Dr. Shih with the contents of a stomach in his hands.

"Raymond, Raymond," he said, "Mannfried is dying . . ."

"Is that so," I said.

A ripping yell filled the house, as if all the voices of the damned were being forced through the throat of one man. I ran to the bedroom—what had been Dr. Mannfried lay stretched on the mattress. One look at his face and I knew what was wrong. I had seen that look on the faces of a family of seven who had died in the 15th century—mummified in the catacombs of France—the look of unendurable pain persisting through the centuries. Only one thing could put that look on a man's face—a look he would carry to his grave under his cosmetics—poisoning by the Amanita.

Luana was a toadstool.

I was afraid of that. ◀

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"It's just as I'd always hoped it would be."

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BOOKS

So YOU WANT TO BE A SCIENCE fiction anthologist?

Well, now's the time. The market is apparently insatiable, and everyone is getting into the act. Really, it's very easy, and enormously profitable. For an outlay of less than $50 (much less, if you live near a good library), and about two weeks of your time (at most), you stand to make anywhere from $250 to $2500, depending on your publisher, your jacket art, your title, your split with the authors, and other such technical matters; if you're completely new to the game, better figure on a modest $500 or so the first time around.

The easiest way to become an anthologist is to edit a science fiction magazine. On second thought, that is probably the hardest way; in any case, if you are not already an editor, it is impractical to pursue this method. There are quicker and far simpler methods for the newcomer. (All tried and tested by experienced anthologists.)

First thing, the essential you cannot do without (and your library is unlikely to have it) is a copy of W. R. Cole's CHECKLIST OF THE SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGIES (F&SF, *Books*, Aug. 1965). In addition, you *should* have as many anthologies published in the last three years (Cole only goes through 1963) as you can get hold of, unless you are interested only in the All-Time Greats type of collection, for which of course you will not want to use anything too recent. But fully as important as the Cole is the largest selection you can get together of individual (well-known) authors' short story collections; without these you will lay yourself open to charges of using only previously reprinted stories. (Stories in an author's own collections are not, for advertising or jacket purposes, 'reprinted'—regardless of how many times the collections have been re-collected.) My advice is to invest in paperbacks, second hand if necessary; among other things, you will need tearsheets on your final selections, and the library is stuffy about tearing out stories.

Now, if you happen to have read some science fiction and have

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a good memory, or if you do not object to putting in an extra week reading through your short story collections, you can think in terms of a 'theme' anthology. This is a good deal more demanding than an All-Time Greats, but a good deal easier for the new anthologist, just breaking in, to sell to a publisher. Let us start, however, with the procedure for the A-T G, as that is by all means the simplest.

1) Pick one story from each of the collections. You can do this blindfold with a pencil, or use a rotation system (last item from first book, next-to-last from the second, etc.).

2) Consult the second listing in Cole, where stories appear alphabetically by title, and write down the titles of all anthologies in which the stories you have selected so far have appeared.

3) Turn back to Cole's first listing, by anthologies. *Skipping over* any anthologies already represented in your first group of stories, select a number equal to those you already have, by the same system you used on the collections. You may (if you are a science fiction reader) have preferences in anthologists; if so, by all means indulge your taste, and stick to people whose collections you enjoy. Otherwise, it is rather good adventure just to open to a page at random.

4) Eliminate any lap-overs. You want only one story from each author, and no more than one from any previously published book.

5) Type your remaining list neatly, including only author and title and *original* place of publication (Cole supplies this; if the short story collection does not have this information on the copyright page, it is quite permissible to list the book itself as the source). At the top of the page you must have a title, of course, as well as your own name and address. Titles for All-Time Greats often, but not always, include the word "Treasury." Use your originality here. The title is in many ways the most important part of your package.

Titles are even more important for "theme" anthologies: important in two ways. First, the title must catch the imagination of the publisher. Publishers have odd imaginations, and it may take some experimentation before you hit the right note. But be careful not to limit yourself too severely. For instance, don't let an overparticipating publisher talk you into changing a title like OUTPOST MARS to something like (with apologies to Arthur C. Clarke) SANDS OF MARS. Either of these is okay for a novel (which both were), but in the first instance, your stories need only have Mars in them somewhere; in the second, they must also have sand. (Do not make the common amateurs' mis-

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take of believing the stories in either collection must be *about* Mars; it will do quite nicely to have them set on Mars—*any* old Mars—or en route to Mars, or dealing with Marsmen. *You* know . . .)

In any case, for a theme anthology, it *does* become necessary to read some of the stories. (Some are quite obvious from their titles.) But as long as you stick to collections and other anthologies as your basic source, you can't go too far wrong; the stuff *must* be good if someone else has used it.

In many ways, you will be better off if you are not a regular reader of s-f (or if you have an exceptionally poor memory), as you will not be tempted to strike out for yourself and include untested stories of almost certainly inferior quality. A word about picking out anthology guides: certain editors are more reliable than others. If you want a really representative A-T G, for instance, don't limit yourself to Moskowitz and Wollheim on the one hand, or Boucher and Merril on the other. Nor can you trust Knight and Conklin by themselves, simply because they are *too* representative; you might get anything. A good assortment, in a collection of twenty stories (a good average number of an A-T G) is one each of Moskowitz, Wollheim, and Martin Greenberg, for that Good Old Science Fiction feel; one each of the magazine annuals; if you used a Gold GALAXY READER, add a Pohl title to make sure you have some good sick-comic social satire; if you used a Mills-or-later BEST FROM F&SF, Boucher's own A-T G, A TREASURY OF GREAT SCIENCE FICTION, will assure you of at least one story of literary quality; one piece from a recent (1960's) Merril Annual, if you avoid well-known science fiction names, will give you one selection a little bit *different*, or way-out—

As I said earlier, this is where to exercise your personal preference. Use the anthologists you yourself enjoy reading; if you don't read, or don't enjoy, however, be sure to balance out your list in some pattern like the one above. The best percentage for current standards of anthology production is about one-half from earlier anthologies, the rest from short story collections. If there is something previously uncollected in any form that you feel you *must* use, like a story of your own, or a gem from a fanzine, or an unpublished (for *no* good reason) manuscript by a famous author, my suggestion is to slip it in *after* you have a contract on the book; including it beforehand may prejudice your chances of publication.

Enough. If you have any talent at all for this kind of work, there is no need to tell you more. As for details of procedure regarding submission of manuscripts, the sales

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pitch, securing of story permissions, contract negotiation, etc. etc., for only six (6) different hardcover Merril anthology wrappers you can receive, *absolutely free*, my instruction booklet entitled, "How to get rich and influence events as a science fiction anthologist."

And in case you thought I was *kidding* or something, bear in mind that the front-runners reported on here are only the first of what will probably be forty or more anthologies—hard and soft cover, reprint, 'new' and original —published in the U.S. this year.

Just to start with, remember that there are now nine 'annuals' (or biennials in some cases) originating in this country, and at least two British volumes of the same sort regularly published here, most all of them appearing in both hardcover and paperback editions —say, fifteen books at least before you start counting the one-shots.

Most of these book-periodicals serve a valid purpose, selecting new or recent work of superior quality from current magazines (five of the regular volumes are attached to individual magazines) and from the new books—or, in the case of collections of originals (like the British NEW WRITINGS, or the new ORBIT series here) providing what at least *should* be a book market for original stories of unusual quality unsuited to the demands of the magazines. In my stack now are four of these series publications.

THE NINTH GALAXY READER[1] is—like *Galaxy*—a very mixed bag, everything from excellent to inane. Outstanding are Richard Wilson's "The Watchers in the Glade" and R. A. Lafferty's "Slow Tuesday Night;" Wilson is moody and dramatic, Lafferty outrageous and hilarious, but both are solidly spectacular stuff in the symbolic vein, first-rate examples of the new kind of s-f. Harry Harrison's "How the Old World Died," Fred Pohl's "The Children of Night," and Larry Niven's "Wrong-Way Street" are all superior science fiction of the sort that typified the best in *Galaxy* in the fifties. Roger Zelazny's "The Monster and the Maiden" and Damon Knight's "An Ancient Madness" are highly mannered fairy tales: the Zelazny, short and sharp, was the more effective for me—but I am not much of a fairy-tale buff. In addition, there are three standards by Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, and Lester del Rey; a blunted savagery by Philip José Farmer; and a dull joke by C. C. MacApp. Overall, the book leaves a curiously bad taste; its one cohesive element is a sort of Black Humored dim view

[1]THE NINTH GALAXY READER, ed. Frederik Pohl; Doubleday, 1966; 203 pp., 12 stories; $3.95.

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of humanity, not so strong in most of the individual stories as to be actively unpleasant, but mounting in cumulative effect.

The new IF READER[2] is less representative of the magazine. *If* has been following a consistent policy of introducing at least one new writer per issue, and this would have been a considerably more interesting collection (and quite possibly a better-quality one) if Pohl had resisted the understandable temptation to throw in the best 'names' available—unfortunately seldom represented in *If* with their best work. (This last applies to Keith Laumer, one of the early *If* discoveries, but now a budding 'name' himself, represented in the magazine almost exclusively by the endless *Retief* stories; the sample included here is very standard stock.) Best-of-book are Fred Saberhagen's "The Life Hater" and Jonathan Brand's "Long Day in Court" (both authors originally introduced in *If*), and John Brunner's "A Better Mousetrap." Leiber's "The 64-Square Madhouse" is great fun for chess buffs, but otherwise far from his best. Robert F. Young, Jerome Bixby, A. E. van Vogt, and Pohl himself contribute tiredly professional retellings of old ideas.

Also on hand is the reprint edition of THE BEST FROM F&SF: Eleventh Series[3]; this is the one with Cordwainer Smith's "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard," Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," John Anthony West's "George," Davidson's "The Sources of the Nile" . . .

The newest thing in series-anthologies of course is Damon Knight's ORBIT 1,[4] the first volume of a book-periodical of original s-f. It emerges as a most uneven volume leaning more to polish than profundity, rather stronger on technique than concept. It is an excellently readable collection, but —

Of the nine stories, there are no more than four I am likely to read a second time, and of those four, only two 'needed' a book like this to achieve publication. The outstanding inclusion here is Richard McKenna's posthumous "The Secret Place," long overdue for publication, and by itself, I suppose, justifying the existence of the book. Almost the same thing might be said of James Blish's "How Beautiful with Banners," if he had finished the story he began. Rich, meaty, absorbing in its opening pages, it seems to run out of content half way through: a woman more complex and believable than any character of Blish's

[2]THE IF READER OF SCIENCE FICTION, ed. Frederik Pohl; Doubleday, 1966; 252 pp., 9 stories; $4.50.
[3]THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION: ELEVENTH SERIES, ed. Robert P. Mills; Act M-137; 1966 (reprint); 254 pp., 16 stories; 45¢.
[4]ORBIT 1, ed. Damon Knight; Putnam, 1966, 192 pp., 9 stories; $3.50.

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I have ever read turns into a scientifictional spinster stereotype; a compelling emotional experience seems to degenerate into a pale dirty joke. Yet the first part is so extraordinary that I know I will return to it, ignoring the dropoff afterwards. I do not understand why the McKenna has not seen print before now; I can see why a book of this sort would be neeessary for the publication of the Blish. The same applies to Sonya Dorman's "Splice of Life," for somewhat different reasons: it, too, is flawed, for me at least, by what seems like a last-minute insertion of a science-fictional rationale in what is otherwise a strong, satisfying, and completely unclassifiable story—this last characteristic making it an unlikely sale for any magazine I can think of. Virginia Kidd's "Kangaroo Court" is the fourth valuable find here—less potent than the McKenna in its symbolic content, but a solid piece of science fiction wrapped up in some elegant prose. There are, also, a somewhat overwritten good idea by Kate Wilhelm, a beautifully smooth mood piece with not much idea at all by Poul Anderson, a shrill giggle by Allison Rice, a gorgeously colored bottle of bird-woman relish by Tom Disch, and an unoriginal but strongly written underwater story by Keith Roberts. Of them all, only the Kidd and McKenna seem to me to fit Knight's stated aims: ". . . to put together a collection of unpublished stories good enough to stand beside an anthology of classic science fiction."

Another Knight offering accomplishes this aim, except for the "unpublished" specification: CITIES OF WONDER [5] is probably both the best collection and the *most*-published one of the present group, containing as it does, Forster's "The Machine Stops," Blish's "Okie," Benet's "By the Waters of Babylon," and Heinlein's " 'It's Great to Be Back!' " as well as Don A. Stuart's "Forgetfulness," Miller's "Dumb Waiter," and Kornbluth's "The Luckiest Man in Denv." Slightly less familiar ("unreprinted" previously—which is to say, previously reprinted only in "collections," not anthologies) are Ballard's "Billenium," Kuttner's "Jesting Pilot," and Aldiss' "The Underprivileged." Robert Abernathy's "Single Combat" is, I believe, reprinted here (in any use of the word) for the first time—and *high* time. Not a bad or even half-bad story in the lot, and more than half are very good ones. If there are more than two or three you haven't read, it's worth buying; for that matter, it's worth buying anyhow, to give to someone new to s-f.

Next on the list are three period-

[5] CITIES OF WONDER, ed. Damon Knight; Doubleday, 1966; 252 pp., 11 stories; $4.50.

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piece collections, two of which present themselves as comprehensive showcases of 'modern' science fiction, although the definition varies considerably. Sam Moskowitz's MODERN MASTERPIECES [6] starts with E. E. Smith and goes through Philip José Farmer, containing only three stories (out of 21) first published in the past fifteen years; and only one from a source outside the American science fiction specialty magazines —Ray Bradbury's "Wake for the Living," from a 1947 issue of *Dime Mystery*. Christopher Cerf's VINTAGE ANTHOLOGY [7] has only three (out of 20) stories published *more* than fifteen years ago: the earliest is Martin Gardner's 1946 "No-Sided Professor," from *Esquire*, the most recent new story by William Styron, published for the first time in the anthology; only nine selections are from the American specialty publications, with other sources including *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Harvard Lampoon*, the British science fiction magazines, translations from the Polish and Spanish, etc.

The difference in the two books is clearly stated by the editors. Where Moskowitz deplores the fact that (after Farmer introduced Sex to science fiction) " . . . it was the *completeness* of the usurpation of the strongholds of scientific wonder, action, and romance by stories of a philosophical, psychiatric, or sexual bent that posed a danger," Cerf proclaims that "space-age fiction," dating from the end of World War II, "has helped to turn science-fiction writers away from technology as an end in itself, and, consequently, has led them to subordinate their scientific imagination to an increased concern with human attitudes and emotions, on the one hand, and with the field of sociology on the other. This new trend," he adds, "has succeeded in raising noticeably the literary standards of the science fiction story."

Only five authors appear in both anthologies: Sturgeon, Wyndham, Simak, Bradbury, and Clarke. (Typically, Moskowitz represents Sturgeon with the 1941 "Microcosmic God," and Cerf with the 1956 "And Now the News.") MASTERPIECES adds to those already mentioned some well-tested, tried-and-true selections by Leinster, Williamson, del Rey, Heinlein, van Vogt, Asimov, and Leiber, and a shocking total of ten stories for which I have not found any previous book publication (although I believe two or three *have* appeared in collections not on my

[6] MODERN MASTERPIECES OF SCIENCE FICTION, ed. Sam Moskowitz; World, 1966; 518 pp., 21 stories; $6.00.

[7] THE VINTAGE ANTHOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION, ed. Christopher Cerf; Vintage Books, 1966; 307 pp., 20 stories, plus biographical notes; paper, $1.65.

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shelves), by Smith, Campbell, Wyndham, de Camp, Bloch, Bradbury, Henry Kuttner, C. L. Moore, Edmond Hamilton, and Eric Frank Russell. Unfortunately, my remarks earlier about avoiding untested selections were not entirely sardonic; there *are* some re-readable stories in the s-f magazines more than two or three years old that have not yet been reprinted anywhere—but most of them are either precocious examples of (what *I* call) *modern* science fiction, just coming into its own (and apparently unrecognized as yet by either Moskowitz or Cerf), or they are for one reason or another unavailable. Moskowitz's desire to make use of his vast knowledge of the field to add some freshness to his book is understandable—but on the whole, unfortunate. The Campbell and de Camp (both of which I suspect *have* been in collections), are the only entries in that last group that add anything much to the book.

Cerf has been much more discreet. He includes only four items previously unreprinted in any form: the Styron original, the *Lampoon* item (a short-short by John C. Brust), and selections from José Maria Gironella's fascinating PHANTOMS AND FUGITIVES and from THE MODERN POLISH MIND ("I Kill Myself" by Julian Kawalec). In addition to these and the five overlap authors, he includes Roald Dahl, Idris Seabright, Martin Gardner, C. M. Kornbluth, Robert Sheckley, Damon Knight, Fredric Brown, J. G. Ballard, Avram Davidson, Alfred Bester, and Walter M. Miller, Jr.

Box score for the two anthologies (remembering that I am citing only previous appearances I am *sure* of, and that both scores are probably a bit higher) runs something like this (*p.a.* = previous anthologization; *c.* = individual author's collection):

VINTAGE: c. only—8, one p. a.—1, one p. a. and c.—1, two p. a. and c.—2, two p. a.—3, three p. a.—1; total previously reprinted—16 of 20.

MASTERPIECES: c. only—3, one p. a.—2, one p. a. and c.—4, two p. a. and c.—0, two p. a.—1, three p. a.—1; total previously reprinted—11 of 21.

But of course if you go by the usual rules, and shut out the 'collections' both books contain only eight previously reprinted stories. If, on the other hand, you were to combine them so as to make one good volume doing what both of them purport to do (while still ignoring *modern* s-f of the sixties), you would take—

"Night," "With Folded Hands," ". . . We Also Walk Dogs," "Liar!" "Huddling Place," "Coming Attraction," "Before Eden," and "Mother" from MASTERPIECES; and add "An Egg a Month from All Over," "There Will Come

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Soft Rains," "And Now the News," "No-Sided Professor," "The Death of the Sea," "The Analogues," "Chronopolis," and "A Canticle for Liebowitz" from Cerf. It would make a good start, anyhow; of course there wouldn't be anything very fresh in it—unless you added some *modern* stuff.

A valuable reference work, if used with care, is the companion-piece to MASTERPIECES, SEEKERS OF TOMORROW,[8] which offers biographical essays on twenty-one science fiction writers (from E. E. Smith to Philip Jose Farmer), plus a chapter on *Superman* and a final catchall section recognizing the contributions of another dozen or so authors to the field. The book purports to be aimed at the academic world; I suspect a good many professors of literature will stop short on the second page of the first chapter when they hit a sentence like:

What were the elements that have caused writers as well as readers to cherish The Skylark of Space *as the seedling of cosmic literature destined to burgeon limitlessly in awesome concepts?*

But for those who can acclimate themselves to the Moskowitz literary style and critical opinions, there is a wealth of information to be gained on the background of specialty science fiction, and the careers of some of its most popular authors. The way to get the most out of Moskowitz is to remember that the bibliographic and publishing information is extremely reliable, as are specific bits of factual information wherever offered (and there are many offered): dates, place names, pseudonyms, etc., have been assiduously researched. *Everything else* must be taken with one or more grains of salt. Moskowitz's tastes are strong, and they tend to color his views of individuals. His certainties are many, and highly questionable. (Taking advantage of two of my hats, let me, by way of example, correct one such immediately. On pp. 366-7, the author discusses Ray Bradbury's influence on several writers; I cannot speak for Richard Matheson, Charles E. Fritch, or James Blish, but I can and do assert that although I have admired much of Bradbury's work since then, I had not, to my knowledge, read anything of his when I myself began writing science fiction. Certainly, I *could not* have read "The Shape of Things" in the February, 1948 *Thrilling Wonder* before writing "That Only A Mother . . . ," which as Moskowitz points out, appeared in the June, 1948 *Astounding*, but was written in the spring of 1947. I suppose it is *possible* to write and sell a story conceived in January in time to

[8] SEEKERS OF TOMORROW, Sam Moskowitz; World, 1966; 433 pp. plus 7 pp. index; $6.00.

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have it appear on the stands in May—but it is highly unlikely.)

Keep a sharp eye out for the distinction between facts and conclusions, and bear in mind that the choice of subjects is a highly subjective one (so that, for instance, Mort Weisinger is included "for his role in transferring the ideas of science fiction to the comic magazines," and Robert Bloch "to indicate the debt that the motion picture and television world owes to science fiction in its handling of suspense," but Anthony Boucher's role as a 'shaper of science fiction' is considered so insignificant that he is mentioned only twice—once in a roster of members of the 'Manana Club,' once as narrator of a Bradbury script, not at all as author, editor, or critic). After you winnow out the opinions, you will have a good stock of pure gold information left.

There are two more new and valuable reference works:

SCIENCE FICTION TITLE CHANGES[9] is an admittedly incomplete-as-yet, first edition of an index of stories and books which have appeared under more than one title. A useful idea, and with the (requested) assistance of users in preparing the next edition, it should become a uniquely valuable addition to any s-f reference library.

The M.I.T. INDEX TO THE SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES[10] is now available in its final, enlarged, revised hardbound version, a fully adequate successor now to the original Day Index (covering 1926-1950). The list of magazines covered is now, I believe, complete. (The original looseleaf M.I.T. book included only the major magazines.) And the new book contains not only the usual alphabetical listing by title and author, but an additional list showing the contents of each issue of each magazine. Purchasers of the volume will receive notification from the publishers of any errata or omissions reported by users. A long-needed volume, handsomely accomplished.

Burroughs fans will also be interested in what is probably the definitive bio/bibliographic volume on his work, a meaty, exhaustive book by Richard Lupoff,[11] lav-

[9] SCIENCE FICTION TITLE CHANGES, compiled by Michael Viggiano & Donald Franson; National Fantasy Fan Federation, 1965; 47 pp.; paper, $1.00.

[10] INDEX TO THE S-F MAGAZINES, 1951-1965, compiled by Erwin R. Strauss; the M.I.T. Science Fiction Society, 1966; 207 pp. (8.5 x 11 inches); $8.00. (Available from the M.I.T. S.F. Society, Room W20-443, M.I.T., 77 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02139).

[11] EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS, MASTER OF ADVENTURE, Richard A. Lupoff; Canaveral Press, 1965; 274 pp. plus 20 pp. bibliography and index, and 12 full-page illus (Frank Fazetta, Reed Crandall, Al Williamson); Preface by Henry Hardy Heins; $7.50.

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ishly illustrated, and available (if not already unavailable) in a special limited edition at $15.00, in addition to the trade edition.

And once again, I find I have left for last a volume that cannot be discussed in a few brief lines, except this way: *Buy it!*

I am referring to H. Bruce Franklin's FUTURE PERFECT,[12] the 'period piece' that *knows* what it is, mentioned earlier. This combined anthology and critical essay of/on 19th Century American science fiction is witty, informative, literate, imaginative, well-selected, and—*fresh.*

—JUDITH MERRIL

[12]FUTURE PERFECT—AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, H. Bruce Franklin; Oxford, 1966; 401 pp.; $6.50.

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Here is the second and concluding part of John Brunner's new novel. If you missed the first installment, the author's synopsis will bring you right up to date. The story is about the preparations for an unusual new play, and none of the mysteries surrounding its production have yet begun to unravel. Here, the novel rushes toward a startling and unexpected conclusion.

THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME

by John Brunner

SYNOPSIS: At thirty-two, MURRAY DOUGLAS, one-time darling of London's West End theatres, looked fifty and felt a hundred. A disastrous marriage and a long spell of alcoholism had almost wrecked his career.

His agent, ROGER GRADY, could find no work for him—until famous director SAM BLIZZARD started to assemble a company for the mysterious but highly-regarded Argentine playwright MANUEL DELGADO. The plan was to prepare a collectively-improvised drama at Fieldfare House, a bankrupt country club possessing its own miniature theatre.

Nothing could stop Murray seizing the chance to join this venture: certainly not the views of drama critic PAT BURNETT who called the company a bunch of has-beens; not even being told by Roger that when Delgado put on a similar play in Paris the star killed himself and one of the actresses wound up in an asylum.

Welcomed to Fieldfare House by the sinister steward VALENTINE, Murray was dismayed to discover enough liquor to tempt a saint in his lavishly furnished room. However, that might be an honest oversight; he asked for fruit juice instead.

It was a worse shock to find that Burnett had been half right. The company included no one of star calibre: CONSTANT BAINES had spent his working life in repertory, without reaching the West End; ADRIAN GARDNER's liking for little boys was a public scandal; IDA MARR, showing her age, was a notorious Lesbian—and already paying

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attention to the youngest, least experienced member of the cast, the attractive HEATHER CARSON. JESS AUMEN, the musical director, and lighting engineer LESTER HARKHAM were reliable enough, but designer GERRY HOADING was known to be a heroin addict.

Still, Blizzard believed in Delgado, and on meeting the playwright Murray realised he was indeed in the presence of a genius. An unsavoury one, though. As he himself declared, his speciality was "cancer and gangrene"—in modern society—"at the stage where the disease is past hope of cure."

The work took fire at once. But strange events disturbed Murray all the time. He found liquor planted in his suitcase, for instance. Gerry appealed to him to take care of a jar of heroin for him—he'd been given so much he was afraid he might be tempted to overdose himself; thinking to hide it inside the TV set installed in his room, Murray enlisted Lester's help to open the set up, and found it contained unaccountable extra circuits. It was live, and couldn't be turned off. Its flex ran under the floor into the next room, Number 13, unoccupied because theatre people are superstitious, but containing gadgetry Valentine didn't want anybody to see.

Moreover, there were tape decks hidden in all their beds, connected to an inexplicable tracery of fine wire embroidered on the mattresses. Challenged on this, Delgado maintained the recorders were for "sleep-teaching", to increase the actors' identification with their roles, but Murray found no speaker attached to his.

Lester ascribed all this to quasi-scientific mumbo-jumbo, and said for all he cared Delgado could believe in magic so long as he got results. Murray wasn't so easily satisfied.

Troubled by many other subtle problems—like the nightly locking of the gates, the fencing of the grounds with barbed wire, and the willingness of everybody else to spend the evenings quietly sitting around like children at boarding-school—he continued to needle Delgado in the hope of getting at the truth, while achieving some of his best-ever acting during their rehearsals.

Finally Delgado blew up. He accused Murray of bad acting—a charge denied by Ida, though no friend of Murray's—and tore up the first draft, saying they would start again from scratch. Everyone blamed Murray, to his bewilderment; he knew this was an unfair attack.

The shock of wasting so much good work drove Gerry to overdose himself with heroin, as he'd feared. Murray, enlisting Constant's help, broke down his door and saved his life in the nick of time. Under the impact of this nerve-racking experience Constant too admitted that Delgado's accusations were false.

Murray now found that dirty books had been supplied to amuse Constant, like Gerry's heroin and the liquor planted in his own room. Come to think of it, though young Heather had ostensibly been hired to act in the play, no attempt had been made to bring her on stage. Had she been "provided" in the same way for Ida's benefit . . . ?

What was Delgado trying to do—work them all up until they were

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screaming at each other, then put the screaming on the stage?

Determined to unravel at least one mystery, Murray decided he couldn't remain content with what he'd been doing so far: petty nuisance-making like sabotaging the tape deck in his bed, regularly restored to working condition and as regularly disconnected by himself.

Under Room 13 was the stage of the miniature theatre. He hunted among the flies and found a giant equivalent of the wire tracery on the mattresses, hidden by a grille over the ceiling.

Delgado interrupted him and ordered him to stop interfering. Murray accused him of lying, first about the tape decks, then about his reason for tearing up the draft play. Wasn't the true explanation that he was angry with Murray for being so inquisitive?

Delgado's only response was to sneer. "I can afford to throw you and any one else aside," he said. "And you can't afford to do anything. I'm your last hope, Murray. On your head be it."

XIV

My—my head? Oh God, my head!

Murray struggled back from a sink of nightmare. His stomach felt acid-sour, and the taste in his mouth was filthy.

Then facts locked together in his mind and he was awake in horror. His eyes snapped open. He lay amid a tangle of bedclothes. The air was heavy with an odour he at first refused to recognise. He rolled his head and could deny it no longer.

On the bedside table, a bottle of gin three parts empty.

He touched a patch of moisture on the bed. The contact scented his fingers with juniper.

It isn't true. God, let it not be true!

Fighting blind terror, he sat up and put his legs to the floor. Another wet patch, on the carpet. Across the room, under the washbasin, another bottle of gin. Full.

Murray groaned and put his head in his hands. Last night . . . What *happened* to last night? His memory held nothing but grey fog.

He forced himself to his feet. Crossing the room, he bent to the cold tap, rinsed foulness from his mouth, scooped handfuls of water over his face and head. His mind cleared.

"All right," he said aloud. "I don't believe it."

And silently ended: *I daren't.*

Like a stage-set. Give the job to Gerry. Convey that the occupant of the room is an alcoholic. Bottles. Glinting on the floor, a broken tumbler. An overfull ashtray.

Was this a trick of Delgado's? This cynically *evil* trick? Because he hadn't spent last evening drinking. He clung to that conviction. Nothing could have driven him to the suicide road again. *Nothing.*

Therefore an article of faith: he

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had been framed. As soon as he secured a firm grip on the idea, he found he could reason with normal clarity.

He concentrated on himself. The headache felt on waking was gone. Illusion? Ridiculous, but . . .

He rubbed his tongue around his mouth. The foul taste, too, had disappeared. When he had really been drinking, he'd had to load his toothbrush three and four times with paste before ridding his mouth of the overnight sourness.

That relieved him of one horrifying possibility: that someone *had* given him alcohol, perhaps by injecting him with it.

A dream? The hope rose and fell in the same heartbeat. He could have dreamed the headache, the foul taste, the nausea, but not the spilt gin, the broken glass.

Something gleaming on the tumbled bed. A coin? No, the cap of the open gin-bottle. He seized it, meaning to hurl it violently away, and misjudged his reach so that he pulled up a handful of the undersheet as well.

Revealed was the familiar tracery of wire embroidery.

But I tore that off even before I saw Delgado in the theatre. And threw away the spools of tape!

He wrenched back the mattress and exposed the tape-deck. Fresh tape was in place; all but inches of it had wound to the right-hand spool.

Murray looked at his watch. Not yet seven o'clock. He had to have proof to support his trust in himself. A doctor. Some way of telling if there was alcohol in his bloodstream. Breathalyser, urinalysis—he'd seen it done at the sanatorium often enough. And if it turned out there was alcohol in his body, he'd come back and beat Delgado till he crawled, make him confess, let the others know what a filthy sadist . . .

He checked his thoughts. Because he had to answer the alternative question, too: what to do if his belief was confirmed, and he had not been drinking last night.

He hurried into his clothes, poured away the rest of the gin and opened the window to flush out the smell. Then he went into the corridor.

As he pulled his door shut, room thirteen opened and Valentine emerged. He moved so swiftly that there was no chance of seeing the mysterious "rediffusion" equipment.

"Good morning, Mr Douglas," he said smoothly.

Murray muttered something obscene and pushed past.

"Are you thinking of going out?" Valentine called after him.

"What the hell does it matter to you?" Murray snapped.

"The main gate is not yet open, sir."

Murray swung around. "Then open it!" he exclaimed.

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"I have instructions from Mr Blizzard, sir. The gate is to remain closed until eight a.m. and it is not yet seven."

"Are you trying to make this place into a prison? Which is Blizzard's room?"

"I don't think he would wish to be disturbed, sir—"

"Blizzard!" Murray bawled at the top of his voice, and hammered on the nearest door. "Blizzard!"

"Go to hell," a voice answered: Rett Latham's, by the sound of it. Murray went to the end of the corridor and out on the landing surrounding the main hall, banging on doors and shouting as he went. From the far end of the landing one of Valentine's fellow stewards appeared with loud protestations to match Valentine's.

"Keep away from me," Murray said thinly. "Or I'll pitch you over the balusters. *Blizzard!*"

The door of one of the rooms swung open. Sam Blizzard was there, rubbing sleepy eyes.

"Murray! What are you yelling for?"

"Is this a prison? Are these black-coated ghouls warders? That bastard Valentine says he can't unlock the gate for me!"

"What the hell has that to do with me?"

"So you didn't give him orders to keep it shut till eight o'clock?" Murray was shaking all over.

"Good God, of course not. Why do you want to go out, anyway?"

Murray rounded on Valentine. *"Well?"* he forced out.

Valentine's composure had set solid, like ice. "I'm very sorry, Mr Blizzard. From Mr Douglas's wild behaviour I judged it advisable to dissuade him from going out. He drives a rather powerful car, and in his present condition . . ."

The door of another room, beyond Blizzard's towards the front of the house, clicked. Delgado appeared, wearing an impeccable wine-red dressing-gown and Turkish slippers.

"What is all the row about?" he inquired silkily.

"Oh—morning, Manuel." Blizzard rubbed his face again. "Murray wants to go out, and Valentine's been spinning some fool story about orders to keep the gate shut till eight."

A flicker of—dismay? Concern? —some emotion showed on the sallow visage. But the voice was casual.

"Yes, I suggested shutting the gates overnight. We have a good deal of stuff here that might attract thieves."

Valentine inclined his head. "I confess I had forgotten it was you and not Mr Blizzard who instructed me."

"All right, since you gave the orders, you tell him to let me out!" Murray rapped.

"What takes you out at this hour, anyway?" Delgado said in a voice which was almost a purr.

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"I'm going—Sam, listen, this is important—I'm going to see a doctor. You know why, Delgado."

"I'm sure I don't," Delgado murmured, but his expression was again clouded.

Blizzard took a step forward. "If you're ill, why didn't you say so? I can get a doctor immediately."

"Someone Delgado suggested? No, thank you. I propose to wake up the first doctor I can find for myself. And it's not because I'm ill. Now does this creature open the gate for me?"

"Valentine!" Blizzard barked. "Go and open the gate, and don't let's have any more of this nonsense. And that goes for you too, Manuel. I entirely sympathise with Murray after the way he was treated yesterday. Don't be longer than you can help, Murray. Today's work is going to be hell in any case."

He gave a glare at Delgado and went back to his room.

Murray turned to Valentine, feeling as though he had won a bitter struggle. But the steward was already descending the stairs, and there was no clue to his emotions in his gait.

XV

Heart pounding, mouth dry, he turned right at random from the main gate. He had to drive miles before he came to a village, and he found only a score or so of houses.

Sighting a heavily-built woman in tweeds, he braked and called to her. "Excuse me! Is there a doctor here?"

"Yes! About a quarter of a mile further on!"

He flung a word of thanks and accelerated away.

It had begun to rain by the time he reached his goal. Oblivious, he hurried up to the door. To the nervous, pale woman who answered his ring, he said, "I have to see the doctor. It's very urgent."

The woman put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, dear. Dr Cromarty is having breakfast. The surgery is open at—"

"I'm afraid I must see him immediately."

"Has there been an accident?"

"No, but it's desperately urgent."

"Well, I suppose you'd better come in, Mr—Mr—?"

"Douglas."

The woman's watery blue eyes widened. "Goodness! Are you *Murray* Douglas, the actor? Yes? Come in, come in!"

She hastened through a door leading off the hall, leaving Murray just inside the entrance. He wrestled with the explanation he was going to give the doctor. Before he had finished working it out, a man emerged into the hall wiping egg-yolk from a shaggy grey moustache. He put the napkin into a pocket like an oversize handkerchief and slipped on a pair of glasses.

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"Mr Douglas! I recognise you from your pictures. Well, well! Angels unawares, and all that. Come into my consulting room."

Murray complied and dropped into a chair. "Dr Cromarty, can you run a test for the presence of alcohol in my body?"

"As it happens, you've come to the right ship—I do that sort of thing for the local bobbies. Drunk driving cases." His expression changed. "You haven't been involved in an accident, have you? Because if so I'm afraid—"

"Nothing like that, believe me." Murray wiped his forehead. "What it comes to is this. I'm rehearsing a new play at Fieldfare House—"

"Yes, I know the place," Cromarty nodded.

Murray said awkwardly, "It means a lot to me, because I've been out of work for some time—under treatment for alcoholism. And of course if my director thinks I'm back on the bottle he's bound to fire me. But someone who's—I guess you'd say jealous—has played a dirty trick on me. I woke up this morning to find bottles and glasses all over my room. So before the director gets wind of it I've got to prove I haven't been drinking."

Cromarty raised grey-salted eyebrows. "And have you?"

"God, no! Nothing on earth would drive me back to it!"

"Hmph! Well, I'll see what I can do. But you realise the alcohol level peaks about an hour after the last drink, and some people excrete it faster than others. At this time of the morning a negative finding might not prove very much."

"I haven't emptied my bladder since waking," Murray said.

"Well, as a fellow Scot I can't refuse you. I just won't promise anything."

"Negative, Mr Douglas."

It had seemed like an eternity of waiting. Murray went weak with relief. "Thank heaven," he said.

Cromarty shut the door of the consulting room and sat down at his desk. "I take it you want a note from me to your producer, is that it?" he went on, uncapping a pen. "I shall put down the bare truth: that you came to me—let's say half an hour ago, which is near enough—and asked me to test for alcohol in your bloodstream, and the result was negative. I won't add the qualifications I'd need for a law-court."

He wrote rapidly and slipped the paper in an envelope. Murray took out his wallet.

"How much—?" he began, but Cromarty raised a hand.

"One of my oldest friends was too fond of his drink, and he made no such recovery as yours. There's no charge."

With fervent thanks Murray headed towards the door. Cromarty called after him. "One more thing, Mr Douglas. I'd prescribe a good breakfast. You've been badly

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shocked—no point in making it worse."

Murray nodded and went out.

Breakfast was not yet over when he arrived back. He could tell that so far it hadn't been the calmest meal taken by the company. At the top of the table Blizzard and Delgado were arguing in low tones; Ida, Heather, Adrian, Rett and Al were also present, their faces morose.

Murray strode towards Blizzard and planted Dr Cromarty's certificate in front of him. "All right," he said harshly. "Laugh that off."

Blizzard read it. During the pause, Murray sent a triumphant glance at Delgado. But the author's expression was sardonic, and Murray's self-satisfaction evaporated the moment Blizzard looked up.

"Very commendable, Murray. But is this why you kicked up that ungodly row this morning?"

Doom gathered in Murray's mind. His eyes flicked to Delgado, then to Valentine standing impassive by the sideboard. He had to go on, he realised, but clearly his visit to Dr Cromarty had caused a switch in plans.

"When I woke up this morning I found a bottle of gin by my bed, and a broken glass. I can't think of any trick more damnable to play on somebody in my condition, and I want to know who did it."

Blizzard drew his eyebrows together. "I agree! So that was why you went to the trouble of getting this!"

Murray had his eyes fixed on Delgado. He didn't, even so, spot any signal to Valentine, but the steward spoke up.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Blizzard, but I myself have checked Mr Douglas's room and found nothing such as he described!"

Delgado permitted himself a quick smile for Murray only. But as Murray was shaping his challenge, there was an interruption.

"That's a damned lie, for a start!"

All heads turned. Murray hadn't noticed Gerry Hoading come in. He betrayed his condition of yesterday only by a slight flush. He was impeccably dressed and had a scrubbed look.

"Valentine's lying," he went on. "I went to Murray's room when I got up. I wanted to say—well, that doesn't matter. I didn't get an answer, but I watched the door because I was sure I'd heard movements. And I saw this creep of a steward come out with a couple of green glass gin-bottles."

Murray felt an overwhelming surge of relief. He glanced at Delgado. The sallow face was contorted with fury.

"Valentine?" Blizzard snapped.

Very pale, the steward said, "I apologise, sir. I am aware of Mr Douglas's unfortunate condition, and can only say I was being misguidedly discreet."

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"Sam, I think we'd better have a word about this in private," Delgado said with plausible concern.

"We're going to have this out in public!" Murray thundered. "Sam, I'm accusing Delgado of putting that liquor in my room, then backing down because I insisted on going to a doctor and trying to give you the impression I was having delusions. And but for Gerry, isn't that what would have happened?"

"Douglas is overwrought," Delgado said smoothly. "I'm not surprised at this wild attack. He's angry about my decision to abandon the existing draft of the play."

"Somebody put that liquor in my room!" Murray rasped. "It didn't get there by itself!"

"Clearly not. But a much more likely explanation is that you staged this little drama yourself to impress Sam."

The barefaced audacity of that was too much even for Blizzard. He stood up. "No, Manuel, I'm not wearing that. But I don't want to start a witch-hunt. You suggested we discuss this privately, and I think it would be better that way. Murray, have some coffee and calm yourself. I'll get to the bottom of this for you, don't you worry."

XVI

"I think," Rett Latham said dogmatically, "that Murray got stinko last night and had qualms of conscience this morning."

Ida rounded on him. "The doctor said he hadn't been drinking, and Sam has a certificate to say so!"

"What good is a test so many hours afterwards?" Al demanded. "Some people get over the effects quicker than others, and a lush is probably quicker than anybody."

"I believe Murray," Heather said with defiance.

"But why should Delgado want to do a thing like that to him?" Constant countered. "That's a much better question."

"I'll tell you," Murray flared. "Stop flapping your mouth and start flapping your ears for a change!"

"Brilliant," Constant grunted. "Who's doing your scripts?"

"Constant!" Ida snapped. "If Murray's got an explanation, then listen to it."

Murray took a deep breath. "You don't honestly think Delgado's abandoning the play was due to my acting. You told me so last night." A protest died still-born on Constant's lips. "He has a personal gripe against me. The only thing I've done which nobody else has is to rip off the nonsensical bits of wire he has on the mattresses. I—"

"Not your damned tape-decks again!" Adrian thrust in. "You're getting to be a bore about them."

"Agreed," Jess Aumen said from his stool at the piano.

"It isn't just the tapes," Murray said. "There's stuff in the TV sets, and something in room thirteen.

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And *under* room thirteen, too. Lester, go and look behind the grille over the stage and you'll see what I mean."

The lighting engineer shrugged. "You know my opinion of that, Murray. It's a lot of pseudo-scientific rubbish, and nothing to make a fuss about."

"Delgado doesn't think so," Murray said. "It was when I was poking at it yesterday that he—"

"Got you so worked up you decided to get your own back?" That was Rett again. "Christ, I'm tired of this argument!"

"Hear hear!" agreed Adrian. "I wish Sam and Delgado would stop wasting time on this red herring of Murray's and come and join us."

"What was done to Murray was sadistic and disgusting," Gerry exclaimed. "How can you call it a red herring?"

"We don't have to ask why you're taking his part, do we?" Adrian said, curling his lip.

"What's Delgado bought you with, Ade?" Gerry whispered. "An endless supply of pretty little boys?"

"Oh, can it, will you?" Jess Aumen shouted. "You'll drive the whole bloody lot of us up the wall!"

Murray recognised the truth of the warning. He walked despondently to the side of the auditorium. Obedient to Dr Cromarty's instructions he had contrived to force down some breakfast, but it lay heavy as lead in his guts.

Jesus, how did I get into this madhouse?

He grew aware of someone standing beside him. Gerry. Fumbling for a cigarette, the designer said, "Murray, how did you stop yourself from beating Ade's head in?"

Of all those here, Murray would perhaps have picked Gerry last as his staunch advocate, but as a result of last night the matter was settled. He said shortly, "Maybe because the only reason I can think of for Delgado to do as he's doing is to provoke that kind of row."

"Yes—but what for? Just to add a real-life tang to his play? It seems crazy!"

"I think we're all crazy to put up with him," Murray muttered.

There was a sudden stir. Blizzard was coming down the aisle, followed by Delgado, and the author didn't look his best. His forehead was distinctly shiny.

"Sam put up a better fight than I gave him credit for," Murray said under his breath to Gerry.

"You don't imagine he's got him to back down, do you?"

Murray gave a bitter chuckle. "Oh, I doubt that."

But that was exactly what Blizzard had done.

Clambering up on the stage, he said, "All right! You know about what happened to Murray this morning. I don't know who was responsible, but I know I'm getting

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through to him when I say here and now it was a disgusting trick. In spite of certain opinions to the contrary"—he didn't look at Delgado, but no one could doubt whom he meant—"I think Murray has done bloody well to climb back out of the mess he got into, and he's worked bloody well since coming here. If there's any repetition, the person responsible goes out on his ear and I will see that his membership of Equity is cancelled. He'll never get work in this country again. That suit you, Murray?"

"He isn't *in* Equity," Murray said.

"I know what you mean by that, but I think everyone else would rather I pretended not to."

"Hear hear!"—in a subdued voice from Rett.

"All right, let's get on. I've been having a long talk with Manuel about the draft of the play. Manuel?"

It was obvious the author didn't like what he had to say, but was having to put up with it. Murray's estimate of Blizzard rose afresh. "Sam has represented that it may be possible to salvage what we have," he said. "I'm willing to concede that a lot of effort has gone into it, and a lapse on the part of one of the cast"—his eyes flickered to Murray—"needn't mean it all has to go to waste. So I've agreed that if he can get a better performance this morning we can go ahead from there."

A wave of relief went through his audience.

"Why the hell couldn't you have said this yesterday?" Gerry demanded, not sharing the general mood. He waved at the big canvas flats he had slashed last night. "All that work wasted because of a petty tantrum—it makes me sick!"

"I'm sorry, Mr Hoading," Delgado said after a pause.

Murray started. It wasn't like Delgado to apologise. He preferred to try and make the person offended appear to be in the wrong himself. Which implied . . .

"Places, everybody!" Blizzard shouted.

Murray walked towards the stage, completing the train of his thoughts.

Which implies Delgado isn't pretending to care about the play any more. He's yielding to conceal his true interest.

In what?

XVII

"There are no end of things about this place and about us which are peculiar," Murray told the air. "Only . . ."

He let his voice trail away, uncomfortably aware that if he was going to start talking to himself he would make the situation even worse. He drew on his cigarette and let the smoke drift towards the blank back of the TV set.

Maybe it was irrational, but he

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couldn't escape the sensation of being watched by the blank eye of the screen. He'd turned it to the wall.

Am I going crazy? Am I crazy already?

He came to the same answer as always: there was someone involved who wasn't sane, and the prime candidate was Delgado. The man made his flesh creep—and yet he hadn't been driven to walking out. There were too many concrete reasons for staying.

He thought all the way back to the beginning of the affair.

There had been the suspicion that the venture was absurd. Against that, Delgado had his reputation; Blizzard thought the idea could be made to work; and Murray Douglas needed any job he could get.

The last item still held good. The one before that—ditto. This morning, Murray had realised he was over-hasty in assuming that Blizzard was dazzled by Delgado. The director knew perfectly well the difference between a fit of bad temper and a real crisis of artistic principle. Today's work, which had carried them into a first-class symbolic nightmare of a final act, was proof enough that Sam cared about getting out a worthwhile play.

To Murray, it was also grounds for suspecting that Delgado didn't.

No one else, though, was taking Delgado at other than face value. Lester was ready to dismiss his electronic gadgets as mumbo-jumbo not worth a second thought. Blizzard didn't seem to have any inkling he was dealing with anything but a conventionally temperamental creative personality. Gerry was siding with Murray for the moment, but you could ascribe that to the shock of nearly killing himself. Compare Constant's affability of last night with his return today to his habitual sarcastic intolerance.

No, there was no real evidence to support Murray's anxiety—only a list of cumulative subtleties.

People's behaviour, for instance. Thinking about TV sets brought one point to mind. Murray hadn't turned on the set in here once—not even to catch the news. He knew why: the additional circuitry frightened him. But no one else had mentioned seeing any programmes on TV since coming here.

As to news: no one had troubled to order a paper as far as he could tell. No one read one at breakfast. Why not?

Phone calls. The company had been picked partly because they had no domestic ties—well, fair enough; you wouldn't want people in a hurry to drive home at quitting-time or risk them being delayed in the morning by a crisis at home.

By itself, it meant nothing that everybody was single, or separated, or divorced. But that didn't exclude

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all personal ties. So why had no one been called to the phone? Why hadn't Roger Grady, for instance, rung up to inquire how things were going? He himself had few friends at the moment because he had been avoiding people since leaving the sanatorium; was this a reason why nobody should receive any calls?

No letters, either. There was a board for them in the hall. Murray wasn't expecting letters himself, but now the significant point struck him: he'd not yet seen any letters for anybody.

There were at least five cars here: his own, Sam's Bentley, Ida's Corvette, Lester's Rover, and a Ford he thought was Jess Aumen's. Yet no one had suggested going up to town for a show, or a party, or dinner. Like children in boarding-school, like retired folk in a quiet residential hotel, the entire company reported for every meal, spent their evenings in the lounge having a few drinks and playing records.

Murray jumped to his feet. How in God's name could you condition a bunch of pernickety theatre people into such a placid routine?

True, the service Valentine and his weird aides provided was such as a hotel might envy. Nonetheless, it didn't figure.

Murray paced back and forth. One final point had come to him —elusive, because vague, but damning when once recognised. Tomorrow was Saturday, and at quitting-time today it had not been questioned that they should work through the weekend on the regular schedule. Another oddity.

And how about the grounds? You'd expect a couple of young men like Rett and Al to be interested in the hut full of sports equipment. The weather had been cool and showery, but not so bad you had to huddle indoors. There was a tennis court, wasn't there? Not to mention a swimming pool.

Nobody went out! As far as he could recall, the occasion when he took Heather to a pub for a sandwich lunch was the last time anyone had driven out the front gate —apart from his panicky visit to Dr Cromarty, of course.

Why?

And, thinking of Heather: she, Cherry Bell, who hardly counted because she spent most of her evenings typing, and Ida were the only three women here. Everyone knew about Ida. But that didn't stop Heather being pretty. He had his own reasons for not making up to her; Ade had his, and Gerry's addiction had endowed him with an eerie-near-sexlessness. That still left Rett, Al, Jess Aumen, Lester— who, though double Heather's age, had something of a reputation as a womaniser. Sam Blizzard, come to that, with his four marriages behind him, not to mention Constant, who had always been chasing girls when Murray and he worked together in rep. . . .

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No lack of men. Yet because of their indifference he had been able to formulate the idea that Heather was laid on for Ida like Gerry's heroin and Constant's pornography.

His head spun. This place was sick, with an all-prevading nastiness copied from a Delgado play. It was one thing to see it on the boards; it was another to be living it.

He looked at the enigmatic shape of the telephone. It had rung for him only once a day since his arrival, each morning when Valentine reminded him of the time. Who was Valentine, anyway? Murray didn't believe his claim that Blizzard had hired him specially. He must have a very close connection with Delgado—

Murray clenched his fists. No good letting this thing run away with him. Any minute now he'd be a raving paranoiac. Determined to do something to allay his fears, he picked up the phone. Another steward answered, not Valentine.

"Get me a call to London," Murray said, leafing through his address book in search of Roger Grady's home number.

"Very good, sir," the steward said, "I'll call you back."

Murray lit another cigarette, hands shaking. *Suppose the call doesn't go through? I'll have to write two letters, give one to Valentine, mail one myself, ask Roger to call and let me know if he gets both . . .*

He felt doubtful of his own stability; he had felt this way when he was first in the sanatorium and spent his time devising elaborate schemes for smuggling drink in.

Thanks to Delgado's trick this morning, he knew he wasn't even yet free of the terror the desire for liquor could whip up in his mind. Much more of the same treatment, and—

The phone shrilled. He snatched at it, crying, "Roger?"

"Sorry, Mr Douglas. No reply from the number you gave me."

Liar? Murray checked his watch. A quarter to eleven. No, Roger might very well be out. Have to try again later. He cradled the phone with muttered thanks.

There was a knock at the door, and his mouth went so dry he was barely able to choke out a question as he swung to face the blank panels. "Yes? Who is it?"

XVIII

It was Heather, in jeans and a white shirt. She looked incredibly young, the more so as she was rather flushed.

"Murray, am I disturbing you?"

"No, come on in!" He hoped his relief didn't show too much.

"I—uh—I wanted to talk to you, ask you some advice. I must talk to *somebody*."

Grandpa. Thirty-two and they're coming to me for advice already. He covered the momentary bitter-

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ness by waving her to the easy-chair.

She leaned back and spoke with forced brightness, delaying the utterance of what she really had to say. "Well! It went better today, didn't it? That must be a load off your mind."

"And on yours," Murray rejoined, offering her a cigarette.

"What do you mean?" she said, raising large nervous eyes.

"You wouldn't be human if you hadn't hoped that a start from scratch would give you a chance to dig yourself in instead of sitting around or sliding away to help Gerry."

"You make me sound horribly mercenary."

"Wasn't that what you wanted to ask about?" Murray sat down on an upright chair facing her.

"Ohhh! Part of it, I guess." She was looking at the back of the TV set, not liking to ask why it was turned to the wall. "I'm strictly a fifth wheel here, aren't I? I thought at first, well, I'm lucky to have this break even if it's only educational —I'll have had a month or so at rates double what I get in rep, and I'll have learned a lot by being around Delgado and Sam Blizzard and you, and if I don't make the London production, so what? But now I'm coming to feel that there was something—well—*planned* about it."

Murray tensed. "What do you mean?"

"I can't put a finger on it. But Sam hired me, so presumably he wants some work out of me, yet he never bawls me out for making myself scarce. And no one but you has commented about it. Although Ida—"

She broke off, looking with distaste at her cigarette.

"I'm smoking too much," she said, stubbing it. "I've made my throat so dry . . . Can I have a glass of water?"

"Sure," Murray said, rising. "Or —wait a second. I have some canned fruit juice which I haven't touched yet. Like some of that instead?"

She nodded, clearly not caring what he gave her, and he opened the first can that came to hand and poured from it.

She drank thirstily, downing half the glassful at one go, and continued. "Yes—well . . . I thought I'd ask you because you've been nice to me, and somehow you've got more *initiative* than the rest have. I mean, everybody seems so chained to a routine. This isn't what I expected—work all day, gossip all evening, and that's it. I don't feel I've got to know anybody. I don't feel anybody is excited about what we're doing—except you. You've asked awkward questions, and found the tape recorders in the beds . . . Am I making sense?"

"All kinds of sense," Murray said grimly. "Go on."

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She emptied her glass and set it down. "You know something? Ever since you showed me that gadget in my bed, I've been worried about it. So every night I turn down the sheet and cut the wire joining the mattress to the tape recorder. With my manicure scissors. Isn't it silly? But the idea of that thing unwinding all night under my head bothers me. Is something wrong?"

"No! I do the same, only more so. I pull the wire off my mattress and throw it away. It's always put back, but it must be a nuisance. Which is why I'm doing it. I want to make Delgado admit what it's really for."

"You're sure he was lying when he said it was—?"

"Hypnopaedia? Of course. Even Lester said so. But he doesn't take it seriously, the way I do."

She licked her lips. "Could I have another glass of that fruit juice? I'm still thirsty."

"Surely." He rose to get it for her, and opened a second can and left it nearby.

"Is the fact that you've turned your TV to the wall something else to do with Delgado?" she asked.

"Clever of you. Yes, Lester found some extra gadgetry in it, and says it's permanently live. I have this ridiculous feeling it's watching me. So—" He grimaced.

"But what can it all be for?" Her voice was very serious. "I can't get anybody to help me wonder!"

"All I know," Murray said, "is that Delgado is more concerned about things like that than about his play or losing money. Was that what you wanted to ask me about?"

"No." She drained her glass again and reached for the second can. "Oh—am I taking your whole supply?" she added.

"Go ahead. Someone might as well use it up."

"Thanks. It's very good, actually. Well—what I do need advice on is this. I'm trying to decide whether I should call it quits. I can't kid myself I'm benefiting much from this. I set such store by it, you know! I pulled all the strings I could, trying to make the West End, and nothing happened, and then suddenly this turned up: a Delgado play, the sort of thing people mention in the same breath as Beckett or Ionesco, and a part specially written—well, that was the way I regarded the offer. Did you notice the stars in my eyes?"

"I seem to recall I tried to put some of them out."

"I ought to have thanked you for that." She sipped and went on sipping at her fruit juice.

Murray gave her a puzzled glance. Her words were quickening, and she was betraying uncharacteristic emotionality. He probed, "But isn't the logical thing to stay? Watching a Delgado play come alive is a chance a lot of people would like, isn't it?"

Unexpectedly, she giggled. "It

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isn't at all funny, and when I came in I was taking it so *seriously*, but —" She looked alarmed, put her knuckles to her mouth, and failed to repress a loud burp. "Goodness, what's come over me?"

Murray sighed. The explanation was obvious. She must have been lubricating her problem with a few drinks before she came to see him, and they were catching up on her. He scowled to himself; still, he was the last person to read a lecture on temperance. He said, "It's no good making me guess what you're talking about."

"Haven't I told you yet? I'm sorry! Ida says she's in love with me and wants me to go to bed with her."

"Weren't you expecting her to?" Murray said blankly. Ida had a positively masculine impatience with preliminaries. And he'd assumed Heather was as aware as anyone of the situation. She was young, but after two years in the theatre she couldn't be mistaken for a convent schoolgirl.

As her next remark underlined. "It's impossible to take her seriously, though!" She giggled again. "When it comes to saying something she really means, she sounds as if she's still acting—oh, God!"

Her voice changed between words. "Murray, I feel dreadfully giddy. I feel drunk. How can I possibly be drunk? I only had one glass of lager with dinner—but I feel so sick!"

Murray moved like a puppet, helping her to the washbasin and turning on the cold water. He left her struggling to vomit and went to sniff at the unfinished can of fruit juice. He spilled a little into his palm and with a terrible sense of doom tasted it. The tartness of the juice masked it well, but there was no doubt the can had been spiked, just possibly with vodka, but still more likely with raw alcohol.

Heather would get over it. But if Murray had opened one of those cans, he might as well have been drinking cyanide.

XIX

Fearful visions crowded Murray's brain. If Delgado were so eager to—literally—poison him, where would he stop? He could see no sign of tampering on any of the cans. Should he offer one to Blizzard as evidence? Not all of them need contain alcohol; he might have chanced on the only two!

Where next? In the glass of lime juice brought to him at dinner by Valentine? There was no knowing. Murray felt himself to be in a Dracula's castle, where every shadow held a threat.

In any case, there was a grand absurdity in trying to poison an ex-alcoholic with alcohol: who'd credit the story? To stay and argue now would be fruitless. He would have to run.

Behind him, Heather turned

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dizzily away from the washbasin. He moved to steady her.

"Leave me alone," she said. "Oh God, leave me alone."

"Heather, it was meant for me, not for you!"

She didn't reply. Possibly she couldn't. Murray's estimate was that she had drunk a tumblerful of over-proof spirit, and even if she had vomited back part it would hit her hard.

She half-fell on the bed, head pillowed on her arms, and after a few moments she started to moan softly. Murray clenched his fists. Running was only half the answer. He had been so blinded by his own plight that he had forgotten the obvious: Delgado would be concerned with the corruption of *everyone*. The plainest example was before him, wasn't it?

Somehow he had not only to make his own escape, but to prevent Delgado repeating this—

Click. Paris. Garrigue's suicide. He had been going to call Roger Grady.

He seized the phone and told the steward to try the number again. Waiting for the call to go through, he made sure no one was in sight along the passage, then locked his door. Something Heather had said itched at his mind. She too kept breaking the connection to the tape-deck under the pillow . . .

He snatched breath in. Lifting her like a baby, he turned her bodily on the bed. She didn't protest. Gently he exposed the head-end of the mattress. Yes, the usual had happened: the embroidery had been replaced.

Some sort of—electric field? Lester compared the pattern to a field antenna—

The phone went. He could barely speak for relief when he heard Roger's familiar tones.

"Roger, thank God! Murray here!"

"Oh, you. What the hell do you want at this time of night? You realise that as a result of your poking Burnett in the jaw he's mounting a hate-campaign against the Delgado play?"

"There isn't likely to *be* a Delgado play the way things are!"

"I already have that impression. Whatever strings Burnett can pull, they work. You may not get the Margrave after all."

"The hell with that—will you *listen?* Roger, this man Delgado ought to be in a lunatic asylum! We've had catastrophes enough to last most productions through a year's run. In a fit of pique he tore up the draft, and Sam had to cool him down—"

"If he managed it, what are you worrying about?"

"Unless you let me finish," Murray said in a tight voice, "I will climb down this phone and strangle you with the cord. Gerry Hoading has come within inches of killing himself because Delgado's got

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him unlimited heroin. There's electronic gadgetry everywhere—in the beds, in the TV sets, over the stage . . ." His voice trailed away. He'd spotted the point he'd almost had from Heather. She was the only other person asking awkward questions and accustomed to disconnecting her tape-deck. Moreover, she, Ida and Gerry were the people to whom he'd first demonstrated the existence of the decks—and the latter two were also the readiest to talk back to Delgado.

Coincidence?

"Hello, hello!" Roger was saying irritably.

"Yes. Well, there's also a girl here who apparently wasn't hired for the play at all—just laid on for Ida like Gerry's horse and a library of deep dirt for Constant Baines. And topping the list, someone is so eager to get me back on the bottle he's spiking canned fruit juice and leaving it for me."

"Murray, is this true?"

"I'd be crazy with relief if someone could show me it's not! I'm doubting my own sanity half the time."

"Hmmm . . ." from Roger.

"You're holding something back, damn you!"

"Yes, I suppose I am. I didn't credit it before, but—did I tell you why Lea Martinez wound up in the bin?"

"No. You dropped some hints, but I was too glad to have the offer of a decent job to pick them up."

"She claimed that Delgado was persecuting her and trying to drive her insane . . ." Roger hesitated. "Damn it, though! If the place is such a madhouse, how come Sam is putting up with it, and everyone else? Is it all aimed at yourself?"

"No, but—Oh, I can't give you details over the phone. I'm going to try and get away. I don't know if I'll make it. The grounds are fenced with barbed wire, and the gate is locked every night at eleven. I may have to sneak out on foot and leave the car."

"What?"

"Don't argue, just listen. I'll head for a doctor's place in the nearest village—Bakesford, it's called. The doctor's name is Cromarty. Got that? Don't think I'm quitting easily, but I think we're all set for a repeat performance of *Trois Fois* and I won't be cast as Jean-Paul Garrigue."

"I know how badly you wanted that job," Roger said slowly, "but if things are as you claim, then surely Sam—"

"If Sam has to learn the hard way, by seeing his cast head for jail, cemeteries or asylums, too bad! Roger, if I don't get to town tomorrow morning, call Dr Cromarty; if he hasn't seen me, call here, and if they refuse to pass the call come and see for yourself."

There was a pause. At last Roger said, "Okay. But I tell you this: if you quit, and they get out a play and nobody kills himself because

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of it, that'll be that. I'll be clean out of patience with you."

"I'll take the risk," Murray said, and cradled the phone.

Talking to Roger had cleared his mind. He discarded a half-formed plan that involved making Valentine open the gate, piling Heather in his car and driving off straight away. She'd already been talking about leaving; best, then, to persuade her in the morning, then slip away inconspicuously—perhaps around breakfast-time.

Roger had only been partly convinced; what could he show as evidence to bolster his story? How about the wire embroidery and the spools of tape? He had nothing more concrete.

He cut the whole area of wire off the mattress and pocketed it, then opened the lid over the tape-deck. A fresh tape was in position; that figured. He put it in his traveling bag, added the cans of fruit juice, and looked wistfully at the TV set. But whatever enigma had been introduced into its vitals, that was too big to carry off. The only other thing he could hope to take would be the spool of tape from Heather's bed. But he dared not sneak into her room till everyone else had retired—Ida, for example, might come calling, and there would have to be embarrassing explanations.

He sat down in the easy-chair and lit a cigarette. It was going to be a miserable wait.

XX

Sitting in the eerie near-silence of the house at night, Murray gradually began to wonder whether in fact he lacked the courage to do as he had told Roger he would. By one o'clock, when for over an hour there had been no sound except Heather's irregular breathing, he could stand it no longer. He rose cautiously to his feet, intending to relieve the strain by fetching the spool of tape from her room. He had counted doors closing as the rest of the company came to bed; he had caught Ida's words of inquiry at Heather's door, but she had not found the answering silence remarkable and had gone to her own room. There was little risk of being heard.

He felt in the pockets of Heather's jeans for her room-key. It wasn't there. He pulled the bedspread half over her and stole into the corridor.

Pulling the door to, he heard voices.

For a second he was terrified. Then a wave of icy control came over him as he located the source of the words. They came from room thirteen. The door was not completely shut.

He crept closer. Hearing what was said was one thing; making sense of it would have to wait till later. Jaw-muscles lumped with concentration, he accepted the sounds passively.

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The voices, as he'd expected, were those of Delgado and Valentine. Curiously, though, Delgado's had a subservient inflection and Valentine's revealed uncharacteristic authority.

"What's happened to the *girl?*" Valentine said.

"Outside, perhaps?" Delgado ventured nervously.

"Don't be a fool. I know when anyone goes in or out."

"Have you checked Ida's signal for a double trace?"

"She isn't there, thanks to that interfering bastard Douglas. The urge was on her tapes four nights ago. And we haven't had a single chance to play for her."

"We'll have to do something about Douglas," Delgado said. "Uh—could the girl be in *his* room?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Valentine snapped. "Putting the scanner in the television set was a brilliant idea, you said. Nobody would suspect, you said. And all I'm getting is a beautiful scan of the wall of his room!"

"He doesn't *know* anything," Delgado mumbled.

"What he doesn't know is hardly relevant. He called his agent in London this evening and said he was leaving. He talked about Garrigue, and the agent told him about Lea. You remember Lea?" The voice was a whiplash of sarcasm.

"But nobody believed what she said! They put her in one of their primitive bedlams, and by now she probably really is out of her mind." Delgado assayed a laugh; it failed.

"You and your indirect methods!" Valentine snarled. "Making him think he was insane! Making him drunk!"

"But it's not too late for more direct methods. He's still here, isn't he?" Delgado was attempting defiance now.

"For how long? He's told his agent he's leaving!"

"We can make up a tape with convincing reasons why he should stay," Delgado insisted. "So much the better if the agent comes here and hears why he decided to stay after all."

"So much the better if he goes," Valentine said coldly. "He's been a worse nuisance than Lea ever was."

"But he's a leading actor in the play!" Delgado wailed. "If he goes, we'll be ruined!"

"The play's your worry, not mine. Anyhow, right now I'm more concerned about the girl. She's tractable material."

"So's Douglas! We got a primary tape from him his first night here, and it said he was *perfectly* tractable!"

"But we've only been able to play to him once, haven't we?" Valentine countered bitingly. "Come on—I want to find the girl. We'll check the unscanned rooms, and if we don't find her we'll look in Douglas's room. And if she's there,

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heaven help you. That wasn't the experience contracted for, was it?"

Murray darted back to his own door and slipped inside. He turned the key, palms greasy with sweat. What in hell was all that about? Unscanned rooms! Tractable material! The urge was on her tapes! His skin crawled to remember it.

Right now, though, he had to act quickly. He strode to the bed and tugged at Heather's arm. "Wake up!" he whispered.

Fighting out of a mist of alcohol and natural sleep, she opened her eyes. "Leave me alone, will you? I wanna *sleep*."

"You've got to hide! Delgado's after you!"

Coming fully awake, she looked blankly at the strange room. "Oh my God. I remember now! You bastard, Murray. You—"

Suddenly realising she was fully dressed, she broke off.

"I was meant to drink that stuff, not you," Murray insisted. "I didn't spike the cans—Delgado did. And he's out looking for you. You've got to hide."

It was getting through at last. "But why, in the middle of the night? And why should he try to make you drunk?"

"I don't know what's going on, but it's thoroughly nasty, and I'm getting the hell out in the morning. You'd better come too, or you'll find yourself in Ida's bed."

"Goodness, I'm not going to turn Les! I came to ask you how I can keep her out of my hair."

"You won't be able to help it. It's something to do with the tape-decks—oh, never mind! They'll be here any moment."

He swung around. The only possible hiding-place seemed to be the built-in wardrobe. He beckoned Heather. She got off the bed and took two hesitant paces toward him.

"Murray, I can't," she said in a faint voice. "I'm a claustrophobe. I couldn't stand cupboards even when I was a kid. I just scream. I can't help it."

"Oh, no," Murray said. He let his hands fall to his sides.

"You can lock the door, though, can't you?"

"I don't think locks will keep them out. Well, we'll just have to face them, I guess. Unless—"

The last thing he'd heard Valentine say: *that wasn't the experience contracted for . . .*

"Unless we give them a false idea!" He snapped off the one light which was burning. "Don't argue. Get your clothes off. Put them on that chair in sight of the door." He made for the bed as he spoke, stripping off the bedspread. "Come on, I won't rape you! But I overheard Delgado say something to suggest he wants you in bed with Ida and nobody else."

"But how could he possibly—?"

"I know it's crazy! So's the whole damned business! At least this will

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give him something to worry about. Oh, *please!*"

The vehemence of the last word seemed to tip the balance. She put her hands up to the front of her shirt.

Shortly, the bed creaked very faintly. Murray, having dumped his own shirt, trousers and shoes on the floor, clambered in on the opposite side. His foot brushed hers and she flinched away.

"Lie down," he whispered. "Pretend for all you're worth that you're asleep. I think I hear them coming."

There was a stealthy noise in the corridor. Suddenly Heather put her leg over his and nuzzled her face into his neck. The very picture of satisfied lovers, they waited for the door to open.

XXI

Murray had left the key in the lock, to foil a pass-key. The intruders had more sophisticated means of opening locked doors. There was a hushing on the thick-piled carpet. He opened one eye invisibly close to the pillow and saw darkness as complete as before.

Apart from their cat-soft tread, the only sound from Valentine and Delgado was a hissing intake of breath.

Whatever the "experience contracted for" might be, Murray thought grimly, there was no reason why he shouldn't give them another surprise. They had both gone around to Heather's side of the bed.

"You fool." The words barely disturbed the air.

"But there was nothing on their tapes to suggest—!" That was Delgado, slightly louder, almost babbling.

"How could there be? We haven't taped either of them since the first night, except in the theatre. Out of here!"

Murray moved.

He was faster to the door than either Delgado or Valentine. He had shut it, turned the key and put on the light within the space of a few heartbeats.

In the bed, Heather gave a convincing pantomime of waking up. She didn't need to feign astonishment, though.

Delgado and Valentine were masked. Black goggles with flat lenses covered their faces, a third lens in the middle of the forehead suggesting an extra eye. Murray had never seen such equipment, but he guessed at exceedingly compact night-vision glasses with their own black-light source.

Valentine carried something harder to identify: a box, with a handle on one side and an open-meshed grille on the other. He was clearly alarmed at it being seen, and tried to thrust it inside his jacket.

"What the devil are you doing?" Murray said after a pause.

Delgado's self-possession had de-

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serted him, but Valentine made no attempt to prevaricate. "Delgado, what's he most likely to do?" he said sharply.

"Call—uh—call the others to witness that we're in here, I guess."

"How many intractables are left?"

Murray interrupted harshly. He was afraid his temporary control of events was slipping away. "Heather, Delgado has a good idea. Take my dressing-gown and go wake Sam Blizzard. You know which is his room?"

"Y-yes," Heather whispered, pulling the robe around her.

Judging by the way Sam had made Delgado eat crow, he should be a tough customer to argue with. But it was nettling that neither Delgado nor Valentine tried to stop Heather leaving.

"Why the silence?" he gibed as the door closed. "Not enjoying this experience, hey? Didn't you contract for it?"

Even Valentine's composure fractured at that; as for Delgado, his jaw dropped as though he had seen a ghost.

"Keep quiet!" Valentine rapped at him.

Murray cast around for something else that might disturb the "steward." "What did you think you'd got when you hired me?" he went on. "Another Garrigue? Well, you got another Lea Martinez instead, with teeth this time."

"We can't let him talk like this!" Delgado whimpered, catching at Valentine's arm.

"Hold your tongue," Valentine ordered. "He's trying to make us angry so that we'll tell him more than he actually knows."

Murray curled his lip. "I know enough—enough to avoid the tapes in my bed, and to turn my TV set around so that it couln't scan my room."

"Keep your head," Valentine adjured Delgado. "He's bluffing."

"You can't be sure of that," Murray countered. "Because I've been dodging your scanners and tapes I'm a mystery to you." *Heather, hurry up!* "But I don't depend on such gadgets—all I used was common sense. Delgado kidded Sam okay, but not me. He lets it be seen much too easily that he doesn't care about the play. He's much too interested in corrupting people."

"You don't count seducing young girls as corrupting them?" Valentine suggested with a sneer.

"I didn't have time. I laid a little trap for you, and you fell into it beautifully."

There was a tap at the door. The tension diminished.

"Now's your chance to explain," Murray said. "Come in!"

He turned. He was so convinced he was going to see Sam Blizzard that he was stunned. Heather had come back, all right—but pinioned by another of the stewards, the tallest of the three, whose name he had never learned.

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Seizing his chance, Valentine hit him over the head with the box he was carrying, and he spun towards the floor in a blinding aura of pain.

He lost consciousness for perhaps a minute. When he came back, he could not rise. He lay, hearing indistinct words.

"I was servicing Blizzard's tape." That was the tall steward. "I'd just changed it for the new playback when the girl came to the door. I imitated Blizzard's voice and took her in."

"Very quick thinking, Walter." That was Valentine.

"But what can we do?" Delgado blurted. "We can't possibly let Douglas go after what he's seen, can we?"

"Of course not," Valentine barked. "He was bluffing, but he was building the bluff on too many hard facts. Walter, is everything else in order?"

"Unless you want another tape changed besides Blizzard's."

"We've overlooked something in his case, that's certain, from the way he talked back to Manuel about the play. But we can live with that for a day or two . . . Manuel, go and edit up a concentrape for the girl. Put in a basic wipe to cure her of cutting the triplem to her recorder. I want the last four nights' urges solidly in her mind by morning."

"You might unstable her personality," Walter countered.

"Too bad! As soon as I've made my rounds, Manuel, I'll come and help you edit a tape for Douglas. It'll have to be mainly basic wipes, with some kind of excuse for changing his mind about leaving. Go on, out with you."

The door opened and closed. Lying face down, Murray fought to make sense of what he'd heard. Concentrape—triple—they were just noises. But these men were talking as if they could adjust a human brain as easily as a mechanic could re-time an engine!

"What exactly happened?" Walter inquired.

Valentine recounted the past hour's events. "Somebody's been careless," he concluded. "Douglas has got hold of phrases—such as contracting for an experience—which oughtn't to be in his vocabulary. Cleaning his mind will be the devil's own job. Well, it has to be done. I suppose he's played his usual trick and stripped the triplem off the mattress, but the conditioner may still be working after I hit him on the head with it. Help me put him on the bed, will you?"

Murray summoned what power to act was left him by the pain in his skull, and snatched at the only thing within reach as the two men bent to take his legs. He gave a convulsive jerk, and something snapped.

"Damn. I thought he was unconscious," Valentine said. "Surprising endurance they have, considering

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their primitive physique."

A foot came down cruelly on his fingers and opened them. What had he clutched, anyway? Murray saw foggily that it was the cable from the TV set. He hoped he had done more damage by hauling on it this time; if what Valentine said was true, it might be the last act he would make of his own volition.

"Just a second"—from Walter. "He's thrown away the tape again, as well."

Valentine sighed. "Get a fresh spool from Manuel, then."

"Right." Walter moved towards the door.

Painfully, Murray gathered the tattered shreds of his faculties. If he could even get to his feet while Valentine was alone in the room—

"Is something wrong?" Valentine said sharply.

"I think I smell burning!" Walter snapped.

Sound of a door opening. A cry of alarm. "It's an inferno! He must have caused an arc when he pulled that cable!"

"Get Victor! Run for it! These places were built like tinderboxes!"

"What about—?"

"The rest of them can take their chance! *I'm* not going to be roasted alive! Out of my way, damn you!"

XXII

The stench of burning rubber drove Murray unsteadily to his feet. The first thing he saw clearly was Heather, eyes wide and rolling above a gag made from one sleeve of his dressing-gown. Her arms and ankles were bound.

He fumbled in his discarded trousers for his pocket-knife and slashed her bonds.

"Go and wake the others!" he ordered harshly. "Hurry!"

She paused only long enough to thrust her feet into her shoes, then fled from the room.

Murray stumbled to the wash-basin and scooped cold water over his aching head. His skull was ringing like a gong. Striving to plan rationally, he spoke aloud to himself.

"Take something with me for evidence. Tape. Or the box Valentine hit me with—*Christ!*"

Without thinking, he had put his hand on the wall for support. That wall was hot! And beyond it was room thirteen, and Delgado!

He dashed into the corridor. Tearful, Heather confronted him.

"Murray, I can't wake anybody! They're lying in their beds like—like vampires!"

"Try again! If you can't manage it we'll have to drop them out of the windows—they won't stand a chance in here!"

He pointed at room thirteen. Fumes were leaking from the keyhole and between the door and the carpet.

"Delgado's still in there! We may never catch Valentine and his

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chums, but at least we can hang on to Delgado!"

He brushed her aside and flung open the door of the room.

Walter's guess had probably been accurate. There was no shortage of power here to cause an arc. A brilliant cascade of sparks was continuing under the window. Something exploded as he entered, and he ducked instinctively. Hot fragments of glass peppered his forehead. He was wearing nothing but shorts and singlet, and the heat struck furnace-fierce at his bare skin.

He had no time to examine the room. He received only a vague impression of banks of complex equipment across which flames and sparks vied with each other before spotting the limp body of Delgado slumped over what might have been an elaborate tape-mixing panel.

Smoke and fumes stung Murray's eyes. A red-hot fragment on the floor bit his foot like a snake. He got Delgado by one arm and one leg and somehow on to his shoulders. As he turned back, there was a second explosion and the floor lurched. He staggered out, reaching to slam the door because he remembered one should not let oxygen get to a fire.

In the same instant a third and this time vast explosion rent the air. A jolt numbed his arm. A dreadful crackling sound like a hundred bonfires followed.

From Ida's room Heather emerged, sheet-pale with terror.

"Murray, I can't wake *anybody*! Shouting, slapping—!"

"Get down in the hall," Murray ordered savagely. "Find a phone. Call the fire brigade, ambulances, doctors *and* police. This wing is bound to go first, but the rest of the house may last for a while."

He came to the landing and at the head of the stairs deposited his unconscious burden. Delgado would live, he decided cynically. He was slightly burned, but he'd recover.

"Get to that phone!" he added with violence, and dived back along the landing of the rear wing.

There followed a period he never remembered clearly. It was compounded of nightmare, pain and a prevision of hell. It began in room twelve, where Adrian Gardner lay wax-white in his bed. No wonder Valentine and Delgado had grown careless and left the door of room thirteen open, if they were sure the other people in the house were in such corpse-deep slumber!

Already fumes were winding up from the skirting and the air smelt pungently of burning. The crackling beyond the wall was immensely loud.

As he was lifting Adrian, something shorted next door. The TV set in here exploded. Flames jetted from the point in the floor where its cable disappeared.

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Gasping, he carried Adrian out. Behind him the carpet began to smoulder. The paint on the door of room thirteen was blistering with the heat.

He was returning from dumping Adrian as he had dumped Delgado, when the whole upper floor trembled. Something roared and crashed, and he pictured all the equipment in room thirteen plunging on to the stage, with its perhaps inflammable hangings. Once the fire got a hold down there, he would be separated only by the floor from a real furnace. Frantically he tried to open the next room—Constant's.

The fool had locked his door. Using a chair as a kind of crude battering-ram he managed to shatter its panels, and so brought Constant out. By the time he had dragged Gerry from room ten, there was no doubt about the theatre being alight: the floor was distinctly hot. The door of room thirteen had broken open in flames, and the carpet was lifting like dry paper. Smoke billowed around. The floor shifted again and settled at an angle—or was that illusion? The slope seemed to be against him whichever way he happened to be going . . .

"Thank you," he muttered, and realised he was being helped: Heather, her robe in shreds, helping him carry Ida in a filmy nightdress . . . funny, one would have thought she'd wear rather masculine pyjamas . . . look out, fire attacking from the floor because the edge of the bedcover . . .

"All right, all right—" But that wasn't Heather. Someone with a helmet. Firemen. Hoses. Noise of windows being smashed. Hope. Help.

"Murray, they're all safe now! Murray?"

Murray clutched at the balusters, missed his hold, felt his foot tread on air. Someone snatched at his shoulder. He looked into a concerned face under a black sloping helmet. Fireman.

Murray fainted.

XXIII

After he regained consciousness, he was content to stay as he was for long moments, feeling a blanket snug around him, hearing shouts, the roar of engines and the crackle of flames.

Then someone said, "Here he is, doctor. He passed out."

Heather's voice.

A gruff answer, with a trace of Scots accent: "I'm not surprised. When I met him the other day I was shocked to see how much older he looked than his real age."

Dr . . . Dr Cromarty. Murray forced open his eyes. There was the doctor, the collar of a pyjama jacket showing above the neck of his sweater.

"Are the others all right?" he whispered.

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"Yes, they're all safe," Cromarty assured him. "Now you lie still and let me examine you."

"I don't mean were they burned?" Murray interrupted, struggling to raise himself. "Are they *all right?*" He pushed Cromarty aside impatiently. "I'm okay—I only passed out from the smoke and the heat. I—"

"Your feet," Heather whispered. She was right, of course: the soles of both his feet felt raw and tender. Nonetheless, what counted was those undead he had carried from their beds.

"The hell with me," he grunted, and scrambled up. "I want to know . . ."

The words trailed away as he took in the scene. The headlights of two fire engines and several cars, including his own, showed that the verge fringing the gravel drive was like an open-air mortuary. Dark-uniformed men were coming and going; from behind the house sparks spattered the pall of smoke smearing the sky.

He turned to Dr Cromarty. "Why aren't there any ambulances here?" he demanded. "Why are they all lying on the grass?"

"There's been an accident on the motorway," the doctor muttered. "A bus crash. But they promised to come shortly."

"Well, then—have *you* looked these people over?"

"I only just got here, I'm afraid. But the firemen assured me there were no serious burn cases, and then this young lady insisted I examine you, because—"

"Delgado?" Murray rapped.

"He had an electric shock," Heather said. "But he's not badly hurt."

Relieved, Murray swung back to the doctor. "Look, these people aren't asleep. They're—oh, see for yourself!"

He took the five strides needed to bring him level with the nearest "undead", and on the last his feet gave such pain Heather had to steady him. Cromarty opened his medical bag.

"Here, young woman!" he rapped. "Take this idiot and put some of this on his feet. I'll dress them properly later, but this will ease the pain."

He handed her a jar of salve and some bandages. While she attended to Murray's injuries, he set off to inspect the line of bodies. Finally he returned, face drawn.

"I don't know what to make of this," he said. "But those people *aren't* sleeping normally. They're in a hypnotic trance."

"Are you certain?" Murray demanded.

"Absolutely. Since I was a student I've been interested in the medical applications of hypnosis. I've even used it for painless childbirth when the mother was willing."

"I thought they might be drugged," Heather ventured.

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"There's one young man who's a heroin addict, or I'm an ignoramus. But I'd stake my reputation on them being in trance."

"Can you get them out of it?" Murray exclaimed.

"If the induction was skilfully done, they will respond only to one particular stimulus."

"They'll stay like that indefinitely?" Heather cried.

"Oh no! The trance will merge into normal sleep and they'll wake of their own accord. But—" Cromarty hesitated. "But there might be posthypnotic commands. And unless we can find out what they were, the poor folk will carry them out willy-nilly when they wake."

Murray had seen demonstrations of hypnotism often enough to realise the implications. People could easily be hypnotised into irrational behaviour. Did that mean—?

But before he could speak again, another car braked on the drive, and a man in a tweed jacket jumped out, accompanied by a uniformed policeman. He recognized Cromarty and greeted him.

"Morning, doc! Sorry I'm so late on the scene, but you probably heard about our coach-crash. Sixty casualties! That's where all your ambulances are, of course, but they've promised to send a few along as soon as they're unloaded . . . What's going on here, anyhow?"

"I think Mr Douglas can best explain," Cromarty said. "Mr Douglas—Chief Inspector Wadeward, County Constabulary."

"I heard you were rehearsing here," the inspector said. "Saw you in *Skeleton* a few years ago, by the way . . . Well?"

Heather had finished her work with a professionally knotted bandage on each foot. Murray thanked her. "I hardly know where to begin."

"You could begin with the reason why all these people are hypnotised," Cromarty growled. Wadeward started.

"Did you say hypnotised? For pity's sake, explain!"

"You know why we're supposed to be here?" Murray suggested.

"Yes, the local paper made a big story out of the play."

"But the play turned out to be a cover for something else. For . . . " *Concentrape? Triplem?* No good. He sighed.

"I'll go over it from the beginning," he muttered.

He told them about Garrigue's suicide, Lea Martinez's insanity, Claudette Myrin's attempted infanticide. At that point Wadeward exploded.

"Wasn't something done about this—this maniac?"

"He's so clever you have to experience his treatment to believe it," Murray said. "And some people don't even then. Well, from the very first evening . . ."

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The tape-decks, the gadgetry in room thirteen, in the TV sets, over the stage; Delgado's touchiness and lying, Sam's unwillingness to pursue the matter; hints from Valentine about "scanning" and "basic wipes"; spiked cans of fruit juice and trying to frame Murray into drinking again, and—and—and . . .

"I don't know what to make of it," Wadeward confessed. "One thing I can do is put out a call for these mysterious 'stewards' on suspicion of trafficking in dangerous drugs. But beyond that . . ." He shook his head dubiously.

"But the whole thing's incredible!" Cromarty objected. "Mr Douglas claims that these people were hypnotised by wire patterns on their mattresses—but that's absurd!"

Murray made to voice counter-arguments, but decided to save his breath. All his evidence was in the wreckage of the new wing. Even if a few of the items were later salvaged, what would they amount to in most people's view? Bits of pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo better fitting Lester's theory, that Delgado was the dupe of charlatans, than his own.

He put his head in his hands. Alarmed, Cromarty bent to examine him and this time brooked no denials. Murray submitted, and let his mind go so blank he barely heard Heather's next words.

"Instead of wild guessing, why not ask Delgado? Valentine and the others have probably got away, but Delgado's right over there."

XXIV

The firemen's routine first-aid had already brought Delgado round, but Cromarty insisted on examining him. Murray was almost frantic with impatience by the time he pronounced his verdict: superficial burns and otherwise nothing but shock.

The playwright was shivering with terror; his eyes were enormous and his repeated swallowing so loud it could be heard even over the racket of the firefighting.

On Cromarty's nod, Wadeward knelt beside him and demanded an explanation of Murray's story. The only response was a moan.

"Talk!" Murray thundered, so furious he would have kicked the prostrate man had his feet not hurt so much.

"It's no good keeping quiet," Heather said suddenly. "It won't help. Don't you realise your friends left you to die?"

A spark of interest showed in Delgado's eyes.

"Valentine and Victor and Walter left you to die in room thirteen," Heather insisted. "If it hadn't been for Murray you'd have been roasted alive. Don't you understand? Your stinking friends left you and Murray saved your worthless dirty horrible *life!*"

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She was almost crying from the intensity of her emotion. Naked hatred replaced fear in Delgado's face.

"Yes, I remember! I was going to make up that tape Valentine wanted, and then something sparked and I touched the console and . . ."

He forced himself into a sitting position and stared at the blazing house.

"You brought me out of there?" he croaked at Murray.

Murray gave a dispirited nod.

When Delgado spoke again, his voice was so feral it was frightening to hear it from so small a man, as though one called *kitty-kitty* and a tiger came purring.

"Those sons of radiated ova. Those gutless sewer-brained sadists. Leave me to burn? Then I'll leave them something. Let them explain *this* to the temporegs. I'll bury them in radiating garbage. I'll have them wiped till they drool. I'll have them blanked into substates and forbidden redukes."

Substates? Redukes? Murray leaned forward.

"Delgado, what's 'triplem'?"

The playwright closed his eyes in absolute resignation. "The stuff you kept tearing off your mattress. Microminiaturised multicore cable. You wouldn't have recognized it—it won't be developed until 1989."

There was an instant of absolute discontinuity. At first Murray was able to believe he hadn't heard right—there was so much noise going on, after all . . . Then it dropped into place. He *had* heard right, and it fitted. It fitted exactly. Incredible or not, it made everything into a pattern.

He said very slowly, "And—temporegs?"

"Temporal regulators," muttered Delgado. "A sort of police. And when they catch Valentine I hope they—"

"Substate?" Murray snapped.

"An incorrigible adult who's had his personality wiped because he's too far gone for psychotherapy."

"Redukes?"

"Re-educational tapes, used to impress a social personality in place of a criminal one."

"Concentrape?" Murray's other listeners were completely bewildered, but Heather was hanging on every word.

"An illegal tape prepared to shift the foundations of an existing personality towards another orientation." Delgado's answers were recited as a child might mouth a poem memorised but not understood.

"Conditioner?"

"A device giving temporary but absolute control over the actions of someone else."

"Does this—this conditioner produce a state resembling a hypnotic trance?"

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"It *is* a hypnotic trance."

Right. Murray drew a deep breath. "Manuel Delgado, when were you born?"

Wadeward made to speak; Murray quieted him with a gesture. Finally Delgado licked his lips.

"After what I've told you already . . . All right. I was born in year 218 of the World Calendar. That would be—2429."

Murray rocked back on his heels. "Then I can tell you what you've been doing here. Bootlegging experiences."

Delgado jerked like a frog's leg connected to a battery.

"Now let's have the rest of it," Murray said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cromarty tapping his glasses on his hand with fascinated incomprehension.

"No, I daren't," Delgado said. "I've revealed too much already."

Murray loomed over him, projecting with all the force at his command, knowing this was the most important performance of his career. He said, "Do you want me to put you back where I found you?"

Delgado shivered. "But the things they'll do to me if I tell you any more—!"

"Wipe you? That'd be an improvement. Clean out that dirty mind of yours! But *they* aren't here and I am. Well?"

Delgado hesitated. Then he seemed to take a fresh grip on himself. "What's the alternative?" he muttered. "Stuck here among these backward idiots! If I keep my mouth shut they'll probably lock me up like that girl in Paris—I couldn't stand that, and at least this is a quick way out . . ."

"Doctor!" Murray snapped. "It sounds as if he's talking about a suicide pill."

Delgado waved Cromarty aside with arrogant superiority. "Poison? Oh, I'm not that deviant, or they'd have wiped me during adolescence. I'm not a self-killer. I'm simply a condemned man."

A sparkle of unaccountable glee flickered behind his eyes.

"Executioner," he said softly. "Well, ask away. If you want revenge, you'll get it. I hope you have a strong stomach. I can get wipes when I go back each time, but you just have to endure your loathsome memories, don't you?"

"Mr Douglas," Cromarty put in, "there's one thing we must know before you go on. How about the —the rest of them?"

"They'll recover in a few weeks," Delgado grunted. "Nothing's been done to them beyond the reinforcement of tendencies already there. Thanks to your meddling, Murray!" And once more he seemed to wander: "Of course you have strong stomachs—couldn't stand your daily lives otherwise. Bad enough up there where people like this sort of thing for a forbidden thrill, but here they

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glorify it as 'art' and discuss it openly . . ."

"What are you really?" Murray said stonily.

"A—I'll get the term in a moment, they gave me a good vocabulary . . . A fall guy. A stooge. Didn't expect to find anyone in this benighted century ready to accept the truth—but then, I warned Valentine against picking you in the first place . . ."

"Stick to the point," Murray rapped.

"Point, yes . . ." Delgado was definitely weakening; his words declined to a whisper. "We have means to visit the past, and techniques for manipulating the personality. Some say it's the next great step forward, others that it's a living death because creative individuals are often the least stable. I don't take sides, but I did just find out how much I hate the idea of being made over by some smug official—pretty soon *you'll* see how much, too." He chuckled at some private joke.

"Now you can't wipe and reduke ten billion people, so they only treat criminals and volunteer deviants. That leaves plenty who behave in public and misbehave in private. The machinery you've seen is generally available; it's used for entertainment and—well, you and your girl are separating and the last time you bed her you make tapes to be reminded by, and like that . . .

"But some things, deviated things, you can't get. Talk about the healthy primitivism of the past and the sterile boredom of modern times and you mean you'd like to get drunk or bed your own sex, or something." The coherence of his explanation was failing fast.

"So Valentine tries to fill this gap by taping primitives like you. Works in a plant making timers, only two on the planet because the temporegs say you *don't* without authority. Got one, anyway. Did a dry run, this century—earliest we can empathise with the people. Meaningless garble on the tapes, all that risk for nothing. Tried next century up—too modern, too civilised, no drunks, dope-addicts except in corners of the world where we don't empathise people either."

He licked his lips. "Me . . . This personality was taped on me. I was a mouse with ambitions when I started, but I had this one clever idea. Actors, I said to Valentine. Get actors who live half their lives in their imaginations. Unstable types, alcoholic, drugged, sexually fouled-up . . . And it worked. Tried it in Argentina, made one fortune. Tried Paris, made two fortunes. Three fortunes he's made out of my idea, and leaves me to burn to death, the radiated pig.

"Trying to find out how close we can come to modern times, see. Next time America, or maybe

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Sweden. Where the trends are set. China's too respectable already, but Japan—"

The words broke off as his face contorted with pain, and Cromarty started forward.

"The man's ill!" he exclaimed savagely.

He twitched aside the blanket in which Delgado had been wrapped, and they saw what penalty he had brought on himself by telling the truth illegally, and what he had meant when he said he hoped they had strong stomachs.

Specialist in cancer and gangrene . . .

Through what diabolical psychosomatic technique of the future none of them could tell, his body had rotted as he talked. Under the blanket, from chest to ankles, his flesh had dissolved into revolting slime.

In the distance, shrill and maniac as the laughter of devils, there rang out the yammer of the ambulances' bells.

XXV

Heather's hands closed on Murray's arm so tightly the grip hurt. Wadeward began to gnaw at his knuckles, and from all sides men hurried up to stand petrified at the disgusting sight. Even Cromarty, with his years of medical experience, had to force himself to feel for a pulse.

"Beyond hope," he muttered, and added, "Thank God!"

Then the ambulances were swinging up the drive and there was a welcome distraction for Wadeward and Cromarty to seize. Murray, though, could only sway back and forth where he stood and feel his mind swimming with crazy visions. He'd been compelled to accept at face value the most fantastic nonsense, and its impact had numbed him.

Then Cromarty and Wadeward were directing stretcher-bearers to carry away the loathsome ruin of Delgado, and he came to their attention again.

"You're shivering!" Wadeward exclaimed. "Why, you're practically naked! Someone get a coat! Doctor, are the ambulances full up?"

"Damned fools only sent us two," Cromarty said. "But I'll take care of Mr Douglas. I want to put a proper dressing on those feet, anyway—no disrespect to you, young woman," he added to Heather. "A very tidy job of bandaging. You'd best come with me too, I think. My car's over there."

Firm hands guided Murray's arms into the sleeves of a police overcoat. Stumbling, leaning on Cromarty, he suffered himself to be put in the doctor's car. Heather slipped in beside him and took his hand.

After the hellish glare of the fire, the darkness on the road

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brought calm. He was able to think and talk clearly again. He said at length, "Dr Cromarty, you may have a visit from my agent in the morning. I told him on the phone I was going to try and make for your place."

"Wish I had my pipe," the doctor muttered. "Didn't bring anything except my surgical bag . . . *Try* to make for my place, Mr Douglas? Man, you talk as if you were in a prison camp!"

"Murray's been telling you about it," Heather said.

"I can hardly credit it," Cromarty admitted. "You're overwrought, and—No, by the lord Harry! I do believe you, now I've seen that impossible dissolution. It's like the story by Poe, isn't it?"

"Monsieur Valdemar," Heather said. "He was hypnotised, wasn't he? Doctor, there's no risk that the others—?"

"You heard Delgado say they'd wake up naturally," Murray reminded her.

"But I also heard him say he'd been born in a year that hasn't happened yet. I think he must have been mad."

"If he wasn't telling the truth, there's no explanation for what happened, up to and including his dissolution."

"That was so *horrible!*" The last word peaked to a moan of terror, and her teeth chattered.

"Should have treated you for shock too, young woman," Cromarty said. "Not much further to my place now, though." He added to Murray, "Tell me, since you seem to have made sense of this rigmarole, who do you think he really was?"

Murray sighed. Tomorrow it would all seem like a nightmare, with nothing to substantiate it bar the memory and a few twisted scraps from the ruin of Fieldfare House.

Better so, perhaps . . .

"As near as I can make out," he said, "in the twenty-fifth century they are supposed to have advanced science that includes time-travel and a means of altering people's personalities with a field broadcast by an antenna like the one I kept finding on my mattress. To satisfy the illegal cravings of some perverts Valentine was organising a supply of primitive people's experiences in recorded form. Maybe it's like cock-fighting in this country today—it's illegal, but some people enjoy it so much they don't care.

"His customers must be a pretty horrible bunch, considering the sort of thrills he had to provide. Who'd want to look into the mind of a relapsing alcoholic, for God's sake? Drugs, liquor, pornography, sexual kinks—and that was only the start!

"But it's difficult enough to translate from one language into another. It must have proved much worse trying to present the

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experiences of people in the past for—well—the modern mind. So Delgado hit on the idea of taping actors, and this worked and made fortunes for Valentine and his gang.

"They deliberately heightened people's emotions by making them rub each other up the wrong way. If I hadn't interfered they'd have got me down as a hopeless alcoholic—"

"And me as a Lesbian," Heather said.

"It might not have worked, young woman!" Cromarty said with an attempt at reassurance.

"There's a bit of it in all of us," she said obstinately. "I used to get crushes on older girls at school, so it's probably still in me, just below the surface."

The car slowed at the gate of Cromarty's home. The housekeeper Murray had met before appeared to let them in. She exclaimed in horror at Heather's condition and led her away with promises of a bath and a comfortable bed, while Cromarty tended Murray's feet in his surgery.

It was not until new bandages were in place that he put the key question.

"Mr Douglas, do you *really* believe—?"

"Ask me tomorrow," Murray interrupted wearily.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry. I should let you go straight to bed. Not much of a bed, I'm afraid—Mrs Garbett will have given the young lady our only spare room—but we'll see what we can do . . . Mrs Garbett!"

XXVI

A shrilling noise. Instantly he was awake and terrified, thinking of the phone beside his bed and Valentine's hateful voice telling him that it was breakfast time.

But he wasn't in a bed. He was on the big settee in the doctor's drawing room where they'd made him a pallet of rugs and cushions last night. Outside, sunlight. An early bee buzzing. Oh, this was a miracle!

He saw with puzzlement that his watch said one-twenty. Stopped when Valentine knocked him down—? No, it was going all right.

There was a tap at the door, and Mrs Garbett appeared.

"He's awake, doctor!" she called over her shoulder, and continued to Murray, "Dr Cromarty thought it best you should be left to sleep yourself out after what you've been through."

"Then it is twenty past one." Murray thrust back sleep-tousled hair. "I'm sorry if I've been a nuisance."

"Bless you, sir, after what you did last night—it's all in the paper—you deserve anything we can do for you. There's someone to see you, or I'd not have come in."

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Someone to see me? Then the doorbell was what woke me. Murray felt great satisfaction in establishing the fact. Before he could ask what she meant about it being in the papers, Mrs Garbett had stepped aside and there was Roger.

"Murray, am I glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "When I heard the news at breakfast-time I dropped everything. Can you forgive me for not taking you seriously last night?"

"Just a moment," Murray said slowly. "What news?"

"About Fieldfare House burning down and you rescuing all those people."

"But that happened so late that—"

"Not too late for the London papers, I gather. But I heard it on the radio, and then after I spoke to Sam—"

Murray put up a hand feebly. "You're going too fast for me—my God, *Sam!* What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in hospital."

"Nothing wrong with me," grunted the director. He had been standing in the doorway waiting to be noticed. "When I found out where you were I told anyone who stopped me coming here would get a poke in the eye."

"Sam rang me to try and find out what had become of you," Roger amplified. "No one at the hospital knew—fortunately for your rest, they therefore couldn't tell any reporters."

"Here you are, sir," Mrs Garbett called, waving a morning paper at Murray. "In the Stop Press! 'Actor in Fire Drama. Fire swept Fieldfare House, Bakesford, where company in rehearsal for new Delgado play, two a.m. All in house were asleep except Murray Douglas, well-known actor, who gave alarm and carried to safety members of cast overcome by smoke. Three fire brigades called.' "

"Anyone dismissing it as a publicity stunt?" Murray said bitterly.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Roger said with embarrassment. "Pat Burnett is still smarting from that sock in the jaw."

"Well, he's not getting away with it!" Blizzard barked. "I'm going to his editor this afternoon, and if he bleats one snide word in his column I'll have him barred from every theatre in the country. Ah—Murray." His voice dropped. "I owe you not only thanks, but an apology. I don't know what Delgado was up to, but he must have been doing something abominable to us. I just don't believe we could all have been snoring blithely while the house was on fire. I didn't even wake up in the ambulance! We were sleeping like the dead, and but for you, that's what we would have been. Delgado made a fool of me, that's the plain truth."

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"He was a genius. Or at least his tapes made him one."

"What?" Blizzard said, bewildered.

"Skip it," Murray sighed. "Anyway, much as I appreciate your kind words, I'd rather get hold of some food and clothes—"

"I brought a bagful of clothes," Roger said eagerly. "You're near enough my size. I'll fetch them."

He vanished. Blizzard went on, "I'm not going to waste the money and effort I've sunk into these weeks of work, Murray. I'm going to finish the job, and Delgado can rot in his grave."

"He rotted already."

Blizzard checked. "Someone said that at the hospital. Said his flesh had melted off his bones. But it sounds crazy."

"Just be glad you're not. Another couple of weeks, and you wouldn't have had a play. You'd have had a spectacle to make the *Marat-Sade* look like a Christmas pantomime."

"I'm going to have a play," Blizzard said doggedly. "And it's going to put your name back at the top where you belong. I owe it to you. I believe every accusation you laid against Delgado now. He was playing with our lives like a Punch-and-Judy man. Making us wallow in dirt and then boasting about it!"

"Not right away, though—hm?" Murray said absently.

"Of course not. We've lost the house and its theatre. But we're insured, and between us we can re-create the outline we had and the dialogue too. Anyway, we shan't get the Margrave, thanks to Patsy pulling strings, but the New Brecht will take us in two months if we're available, and I wouldn't object to a pre-London run."

Murray was illimitably weary. Time enough later for salvaging the play and sorting out the finances. Right now there was only one point he had to make.

"If you're seriously going on

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with it," he said, "then remember Heather, won't you? You know now why Delgado wanted her around, I guess."

"I think I've figured it out this morning," Blizzard agreed. "To—uh—to please Ida. Not for her own sake."

"Correct." Murray's eyes had roved to the window; here was Roger coming back, carrying a bulging travelling bag. "Well, she's going to be in the production if I have to write her part myself."

"Thinking back," Blizzard said, "I realise we owe a good half of the material to your suggestions, so—"

Murray wasn't listening. He had pulled on a dressing-gown of Dr Cromarty's and gone into the hallway, ignoring Roger at the door with the bag of clothes. "Mrs Garbett! Mrs Garbett! Where did you put Heather?"

And the hell with any susceptibilities you may have.

"In the room on the right at the top of the stairs," the housekeeper called demurely. "I was just going to take her a cup of tea and—"

She appeared with a laden tray. There were two cups on it. Murray took it from her with a skeletal grin and started up the stairs, favouring his sore feet equally.

But the pain seemed to belong to the past, and he was heading for the future. Like it or not.

True or false? A madman's raving, a tissue of lies told by a twisted genius, or cold appalling fact?

Never mind. Let the dead bury their dead, in or out of time. For him, at this moment and with luck for ever, it was enough that in Delgado's death he had found his own life anew. The idea was still strange, but it was comforting. He tapped on the door to which he had been directed, went in, and closed it behind him.

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Oscar Wilde, the Irish dramatist and poet whose life was a series of brilliant and tragic excesses, added, near the end of it, "I am dying beyond my means." And after his death? Joanna Russ captures it perfectly here, and gives us a good story to boot.

MR. WILDE'S SECOND CHANCE

by Joanna Russ

This is a tale told to me by a friend after the cointreau and the music, as we sat in the dusk waiting for the night to come:

'When Oscar Wilde' (he said) 'died, his soul was found too sad for heaven and too happy for hell. A tattered spirit with the look of a debased street imp led him through miles of limbo into a large, foggy room, very like (for what he could see of it) a certain club in London. His small, grimy scud of a guide went up to a stand something like that used by ladies for embroidery or old men for chess, and there it stopped, spinning like a top.

"Yours!" it squeaked.

"Mine?"

But it was gone. On the stand was a board like the kind used for children's games, and nearby a dark lady in wine-colored silk moved pieces over a board of her own. The celebrated writer bent to watch her—she chanced to look up—it was Ada R——, the victim of the most celebrated scandal of the last decade. She had died of pneumonia or a broken heart in Paris; no one knew which. She gave him, out of her black eyes, a look so tragic, so shrinking, so haunted, that the poet (the most courteous of men, even when dead) bowed and turned away. The board before him was a maze of colored squares and meandering lines, and on top was written "O. O'F. Wilde" in coronet script, for this was his life's pattern and each man or woman in the room labored over a board on which was figured the events of his life. Each was trying to rearrange his life into a beautiful and ordered picture, and when he had done that he would be free to live again. As you can imagine, it was both exciting

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and horribly anxious, this reliving, this being down on the board and at the same time a dead—if not damned—soul in a room the size of all Aetna, but queerly like a London club when it has just got dark and they have lit the lamps. The lady next to Wilde was pale as glass. She was almost finished. She raised one arm—her dark sleeve swept across the board—and in an instant her design was in ruins. Mr. Wilde picked up several of the pieces that had fallen and handed them to the lady.

"If you please," she said, "You are still holding my birthday and my visits to my children."

The poet returned them.

"You are generous," said she, "But then everyone here is generous. They provide everything. They provide all of one's life."

The poet bowed.

"Of course, it is not easy," said the lady. "I try very hard. But I cannot seem to finish anything. I am not sure if it is the necessary organizing ability that I lack or perhaps the aesthetic sense; something ugly always seems to intrude . . ." She raised her colored counters in both hands, with the grace that had once made her a favorite of society.

"I have tried several times before," she said.

It was at this point that the poet turned and attemped to walk away from his second chance, but wherever he went the board preceded him. It interposed itself between him and old gentlemen in velvet vests; it hovered in front of ladies; it even blossomed briefly at the elbow of a child. Then the poet seemed to regain his composure; he began to work at the game; he sorted and matched and disposed, although with what public in view it was not possible to tell. The board—which had been heavily overlaid in black and purple (like a drawing by one of Mr. Wilde's contemporaries)—began to take on the most delicate stipple of color. It breathed wind and shadow like the closes of a park in June. It spread itself like a fan.

O. O'F. Wilde, the successful man of letters, was strolling with his wife in Hyde Park in the year nineteen-twenty-five. He was sixty-nine years old. He had written twenty books where Oscar Wilde had written one, fifteen plays where the degenerate and debauche had written five, innumerable essays, seven historical romances, three volumes of collected verse, had given many public addresses (though not in the last few years) and had received a citation (this was long in the past) from Queen Victoria herself. The tulips of Hyde Park shone upon the Wildes with a mild and equable light. O. O'F. Wilde, who had written twenty books, and—needless to say—left his two sons an unimpeachable reputation, started, clutched at his heart and died.

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"That is beautiful, sir, beautiful," said a voice in the poet's ear. A gentleman—who was not *a gentleman*—stood at his elbow. "Seldom," said the voice, "Have we had one of our visitors, as you might say, complete a work in such a short time, and such a beautiful work, too. And such industry, sir!" The gentleman was beside himself. "Such enthusiasm! Such agreeable docility! You know, of course, that few of our guests display such an excellent attitude. Most of our guests—"

"Do you think so?" said Mr. Wilde curiously.

"Lovely, sir! Such agreeable color. Such delicacy."

"I see," said Mr. Wilde.

"I'm so glad you do, sir. Most of our guests don't. Most of our guests, if you'll permit me the liberty of saying so, are not genteel. Not genteel at all. But you, sir—"

Oscar Wilde, poet, dead at forty-four, took his second chance from the table before him and broke the board across his knee. He was a tall, strong man for all his weight, nearly six feet tall.'

"And then?" I said.

"And then," said my friend, "I do not know what happened."

"Perhaps," said I, "They gave him his second chance, after all. Perhaps they had to."

"Perhaps," said my friend, "They did nothing of the kind . . .

"I wish I knew," he added. "I only wish I knew!"

And there we left it.

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Max Gunther was born in England and came to the U. S. in 1939. He is a Princeton graduate, former news editor at Business Week, contributing editor at Time—and a freelancer since 1956. His first story for us is the lively account of R. J. Schroon, multi-millionaire, king of the resort hotel builders and perpetrator of the most colossal public relations blunder in the universe. Will Big Business ever learn its lesson? Which, of course, is: Be careful how you brush off pests; influence resides in the least likely places.

MUNICIPAL DUMP

by Max Gunther

"RODENTS!" YELLED R. J. Schroon. "Vermin!" He swiped angrily at one that was sitting on top of his head, affectionately exploring his ear with its long, quivering proboscis. "I've had enough of them. Get the guns. We'll blast them!"

"Blast them?" asked Joe Ponder, surprised.

"Yeah, blast them! Wipe them out!"

"But they're harmless," said Joe Ponder. He lifted one off his shoulder, deposited it gently on the ground, patted it on the rump and watched it leap exuberantly away. "They wouldn't hurt a fly, if there were flies here. You can't massacre creatures like these."

"Oh, can't I?" rasped Schroon. "Can't I?"

"It would be like murder, almost. It would be—"

"Look, Ponder. I've got fifty million bucks riding on this resort. Fifty million b—" He broke off to utter a howl of rage as one of the creatures scrambled up his pants leg. He kicked savagely. The creature shot out, bounced on the ground, rolled over and bounded away gleefully. "Fifty million bucks, Ponder! Do you understand what that means? Do you understand fifty million bucks, Ponder?"

"Sure, sure," said Ponder irritably. "I understand."

He understood R. J. Schroon

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quite well, in fact. Schroon was a man who had devoted his life and energy to amassing wealth. A big, beefy, florid-faced man, Schroon had lost interest in anything but dollars. He was a millionaire many times over and could have retired to lifelong luxury years ago. But his compulsion to keep piling up money never slackened.

Nobody really knew where Schroon had come from. He had appeared one day at a small settlement on Mars, bought an abandoned storage dome from the Army and converted it into the interplanetary equivalent of a fleabag hotel. That was the nucleus of his present empire. He never told anybody about his earlier life. There were rumors about an unhappy love affair. Some said a girl had jilted him in favor of a wealthier man, back in the days when Schroon was young and penniless. This might have accounted for his money fever. Others said simply that he was an outrageously lucky, but still helplessly compulsive, gambler. Each of his ventures was bigger than the last. Each new venture was built on an immense swaying structure of second mortgages and promissory notes—a structure so intricately tangled that, if the venture failed, the resulting mess could conceivably wipe him out.

R. J. Schroon was the king of resort-hotel builders. There were Schroon resorts all over the travelable universe. Interstellar space swarmed with Schroon space-trains, equipped with the newest harmonic drives that could hurl vacationers and tourists across a light-year in 707 seconds. Schroon was not the richest man in the universe (some of the mining tycoons could have bought him with pocket money), but he was certainly among the best-known.

Not really *well* known, though. Of all the billions of human beings spreading through the Galaxy, only Joe Ponder had achieved anything like closeness with Schroon or felt the faintest tremor of liking for him. Ponder was Schroon's vice-president in charge of property acquisitions. Tall, stoop-shouldered, myopic of eye and thin of hair, Ponder was a lawyer with training in accountancy. He had no great desire for money himself but enjoyed the manipulation of money, as in a giant chess game. He was good at it. Perhaps that was why Schroon, in a sour and distant kind of way, liked him.

"Rodents!" roared Schroon again. "Thieving little rodents!"

One of them had landed on his shoulder and snatched a twenty-dollar gold pen out of his breast pocket. Now it was leaping away, bounding sixty feet into the air and somersaulting as though unable to contain its delight.

"Maggots!" howled Schroon. "Grubs!"

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Ponder could understand, though he could not share, Schroon's vast dislike of these gleeful little creatures. He and Schroon had discovered this planet four years ago. Every word in their Initial Survey Team's first report made it seem ideal. It was about the size of Earth's moon but evidently had a dense core that gave it a gravitational field only slightly weaker than the Earth's. Just enough weaker to put spring in a tired vacationer's step. The climate at its equator was delightful, warm but without mugginess. Plant life was strikingly similar to that of Earth's own tropics. Atmosphere, solar radiation and other environmental elements all seemed entirely suitable for human consumption. Schroon had registered the planet with the Universe Survey Bureau in Washington, D.C., and—exercising the inalienable right of planet-finders—had given it a name: Cooltropic.

After the USB team had checked Cooltropic over and certified it livable, Schroon had staked out 500 acres under the Planetary Development Act and had begun rushing men, supplies and equipment through space. Even before the Cooltropic Inn's giant Y-shaped foundation was built, magazines and TV screens back on Earth were carrying advertisements: COOLTROPIC, GEM OF THE UNIVERSE! The response was predictably enthusiastic. Old Earth was so densely populated that there were no more real vacation areas left on its limited land surfaecs. People had a lot of leisure time but nowhere to go in it. They yearned for uncrowded spaces. They dreamed of wild beautiful places where they could go to lose sight of buildings, places where they could walk without being jostled, places where they could find solitude. No such heaven was available on Earth, not any more. Upon these facts Schroon was building his fortune. And the Cooltropic Inn advertisements brought in a flood of inquiries bigger than even Schroon had hoped for. He ordered three extra floors added to the original plan of the hotel. Cooltropic was going to be his greatest work.

And then, from nowhere, came the creatures. Through all the years when the hotel was under construction, no animal life had been seen on the planet. There were insect-like things: ground burrowers, leaf crawlers and small flying things that appeared to serve a function in cross-pollinating plants. There was nothing that seemed to have the remotest interest in plaguing humankind—nothing resembling the mosquito, for instance. There was no intelligent life of any kind, no creature with a nervous-system development even as high as that of a mouse or bird. Nor was there any

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evidence that any tool-using intelligence had ever inhabited the planet. This was no surprise, of course. Man in all his explorations through the Galaxy had never met an intelligence remotely like his own. The general assumption in those days was that human brain-power was a freak of nature, alone and lonely in the universe. Cooltropic was no exception.

But one morning, Ponder had awakened to find the construction site alive with the strangest animals he had ever seen. In size and shape they were much like baseballs. Each had two grasshopper-like legs, two huge eyes—sometimes blue, sometimes pink, sometimes purple, and not always matching—and a long, thin, highly dexterous snout something like an elephant's trunk. Their bodies were white and rubbery. One of their favorite sports was to leap high in the air, curl up like a ball and bounce—off the ground, off a wall, off a man if he happened to be standing nearby. They seemed to live for fun. They were mischievous, inquisitive and entirely unafraid.

Where they had come from, why they had turned up so suddenly—these were unanswered questions. But the fact was, they had come. And as far as Schroon was concerned, they were a major disaster. It was obvious that either the Cooltropic Inn or the Bounders (so Ponder had named them) would have to go. No guest at the Inn would find peace or relaxation with the Bounders around. Pour yourself a drink, and a Bounder would plop into the glass. Light a cigarette, and a Bounder would snatch it from your grasp. Bring any unfamiliar object out into the open—anything that the Bounders had not yet thoroughly explored—and you'd instantly have fifty of them surrounding you, poking and prodding the object with their snouts to see what kind of thing it was. Stand still for longer than ten seconds, and you'd have them sitting on your head and shoulders, wriggling into your pockets. It was unwise to carry keys, money or important documents in your pockets, for you'd inevitably be fleeced of all within five minutes of stepping outdoors. They were indoors, too. They'd wriggled down the hotel's chimneys and explored its labyrinthine air-conditioning ducts. They had an astounding ability to observe and then mimic human acts, and they'd learned how to work simple door latches.

"Miserable pests!" wailed Schroon, slapping wildly at two that were swinging from his tie. "Go away! Go away!"

The two Bounders dropped to the ground and bounced away in search of new things to explore, but another was sitting on Schroon's shoulder, examining the back of his neck. Schroon hit at it.

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It hopped to his other shoulder. He flailed murderously, and it hopped back to where it had started. Quivering with wrath, Schroon crossed his arms and whacked at both shoulders simultaneously. The Bounder jumped to the top of his head. Meanwhile, another was squirming into his jacket pocket. Roaring curses, Schroon turned and set off at a lumbering run toward the construction headquarters building.

"The guns!" he shouted to the men who were lounging around the building. "Get the guns! We're going to get rid of these things once and for all!"

Ponder ran after him. "Wait, Schroon!" he called. "Wait! There are other ways!" He caught up with the big man and ran alongside. "Look, Schroon, if we sat down and thought we'd think of something. Schroon, listen. We could—"

"Save your breath, Ponder," Schroon panted, slowing to a ponderous trot. "Wiping them out is the only sure way. What do you want to do, build a fence two-hundred feet high? Cover the whole thing with a dome?"

"Listen, Schroon, I've been thinking. They seem to have some intelligence. Maybe we could—"

"Talk to them?" Schroon wheezed with sour laughter. "Yeah, sure. All you've got to do is make one sit still. By the time you do that, we'll all be dead of old age." He plunged through the doorway, pausing to kick a Bounder that tried to follow him in. He went to a steel locker and opened it.

"Come and get 'em!" he shouted. Some of the men hung back, but others came forward grimly. Schroon handed out high-powered air rifles—the only weapons allowed in the hands of civilians. Then he and a dozen men filed out to battle the Bounders.

"Wait!" Ponder shouted. But nobody listened.

One of the Cooltropic Inn's glories was to be a seven-hundred-foot tower, served by a high-speed elevator and topped by a cocktail lounge whose walls were all windows. The structural framework of this tower was complete, and it had become a favorite playground of the Bounders. They now crowded it thickly, leaping and somersaulting among the girders.

Schroon led his armed force toward the tower. He stopped fifty feet from it.

"Okay," he said. "Let 'em have it."

He raised his rifle, not needing to aim with any particular care, and fired. A Bounder fell, bounced off a girder, plopped limply to the ground and lay still.

The other armed men had fanned out beside Schroon, ready to fire after him. But they did not fire. For suddenly all the hilarious activity on the tower ceased. The

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Bounders sat as though abruptly frozen to the girders. They stared down at their dead comrade and at Schroon. Ponder had not previously thought it possible for a Bounder to look sad, but it seemed to him now that all the sparkle had gone out of their great round eyes.

He felt a squirming movement at his side, looked down in time to see a small Bounder scramble out of his pocket and leap away. Almost simultaneously every Bounder in sight was leaping toward the jungle that rimmed the great construction site. Within a minute there was not a Bounder left in view.

The men were silent. Schroon harrumphed noisily. "Well, maybe that did it," he said. His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the stillness.

The men who were holding rifles looked as though they wished they weren't. Avoiding each other's eyes, they turned and walked back to the building. Ponder found a shovel nearby and began to dig a grave for the dead Bounder.

Schroon walked over to him and stood watching silently for a while. Then he cleared his throat. "Well, maybe that did it, Ponder," he said. He seemed to be pleading for Ponder to make some sign of agreement. But Ponder just went on digging.

Schroon was right, though. That did it. The Bounders never went back to the construction site. They roamed the planet for a while in a state of shock, trying to absorb the idea of somebody's attacking them with a deliberate intent to kill. Such a ghastly concept had never appeared on their horizons before. But they got used to the thought eventually. And by the time the Keeper landed and called them for the voyage home, they had recovered all their old joyousness. Almost all, anyway.

The Keeper was not exactly a man, but he was enough like one so that it will not be grossly inaccurate to refer to him in anthropomorphic terms. His body had a head-like protruberance which contained the major part of his central nervous system, as in a man. He had two radiation-sensitive organs which, while they dealt with radiation of a higher frequency than what we call visible light, nonetheless performed the functions of eyes. He communicated in a direct mind-to-mind fashion rather than making noises as a man does, but in a general way this could be referred to as speech. He was not strictly speaking a "he," but it is hard to know what else to call him since his race propagated by means of eighteen distinct sexes. His name, if he could have pronounced it, would probably have sounded something like Sar Gum.

Sar Gum climbed back into his

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interstellar ship hurriedly after he had sent out the call to the Bounders. (He didn't use precisely that name for them, of course, but the name he did use included the concept of leaping and other acrobatic activity. Thus the term "Bounder" is a fairly good translation.) For the thousandth time Sar Gum resolved to seek out another profession. Bounders were pleasing little creatures, but the assignments they and their Keeper got were terrible—just terrible! Sar Gum stared gloomily out the window at the hideous leafy jungle that surrounded the ship. The untidiness of the jungle repelled him. Leaves, stalks, branches: what horrible disarray! And the smell! (Sar Gum had no nose-like organ, but he could detect airborne chemicals with his skin.) The whole planet was utterly repulsive! Shuddering, Sar Gum reached for a container of deodorant spray and enveloped himself in a cloud of perfume.

"Will you quit squirting that stuff around?" It was Stig Hop, the pilot, communicating in mental tones that would correspond to an enraged bellow. "The place smells like a beauty parlor!" (Here again, translation difficulties beset us. Stig Hop didn't actually say "beauty parlor." He referred instead to a kind of—well, bar frequented by those of the 15th and 16th sexes and commonly sprayed with skin-tingling perfumes.)

"It's easy for you to complain, my dear fellow," replied Sar Gum huffily. "You don't have to go out in that—that *leafery*."

Stig Hop thought a nasty word. A coarse fellow, Sar Gum reflected, a fellow of meager intellect and no sensitivity. Just like all space pilots, and just like all those of the 3rd sex. (Sar Gum himself was of the 8th sex, noted for its artistic accomplishments.) The things a Keeper had to suffer!

Sar Gum continued to stare morosely out the window. Some of the Bounders had miniature radar-like transmitters implanted in their skin, and this had enabled Stig Hop to land close to the main part of the herd. But it would take a while for the entire herd to respond to the supersonic call and straggle in to the ship. Sar Gum settled down to wait. He retracted his nether limbs, sank into a state that was something like sleep and dreamed of Rock, his home planet, light-years away. Ah, Rock! Beautiful Rock! The whitest, the purest of planets—a world of smooth, white, sterile plains, where no hideous leafed things filled the crystal air with their fetid stench. Rock! The gem of the universe!

Sar Gum didn't like being a Bounder Keeper because the job took him away from Rock so often. He stayed with the job only because it made him an important and respected individual back

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home. Bounders, with their insatiable curiosity and their enormous capacity to cover land distances, were virtually indispensable to the people of Rock.

Sar Gum's people had become rather lazy in these golden years of their civilization. The old heroic times were gone. There were few individuals any more who cared to take personal risks or endure discomfort. Thus the exploration of new territories needed by the expanding civilization was almost always entrusted to Bounders. Bounders weren't very intelligent—in human terms, perhaps as brainy as a kindergarten child—but they were born explorers. Their relationship to Sar Gum's race was roughly that of a horse or dog to a human being. As long as their masters treated them well, Bounders cheerfully did the dirty work that needed to be done. They cheerfully explored worlds like this horrible, green, leafy one, for instance—and did the job very effectively. Put a few herds of Bounders on such a world, and in a few years they'd find out almost everything of importance.

There was only one thing Sar Gum's civilization wanted to know about this particular green planet. Sar Gum waited until the bulk of the Bounder herd seemed to have gathered in the cavernous dormitory at the stern of the ship, then entered the dormitory to hear the Bounders' exploration report.

"I greet you with warm thoughts," he communicated. It was the traditional Keeper's greeting.

The Bounders responded with a chorus of thoughts which, if translated into sound, would have been a deafening disharmony of hoots, whistles, catcalls and ribald remarks. Sar Gum was used to this and ignored it. He called the herd leader forward. This was a large and unusually intelligent Bounder, but no more respectful than the rest of them. He bounded to the top of Sar Gum's head, where Sar Gum couldn't see him, and evidently made some kind of vulgar gesture. The assembled Bounders communicated a thought pattern analogous to a howl of glee. Huffily, Sar Gum grabbed the leader by the snout and legs and lifted him down to eye level.

"Have you explored this planet?" Sar Gum asked.

"Sure. What do you think we did, sat and . . . ?" (Here the Bounder used an expression which not only cannot be translated, but which would be unprintable in any case.)

"Please try to show more respect to your superiors," Sar Gum chided primly. Normally he didn't chide the Bounders thus; it never did any good. But now, unaccountably, he felt vaguely uneasy in the Bounders' presence. It wasn't the lack of respect that troubled him, nor the telepathic

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catcalls and ribaldries. These represented normal Bounder behavior; these he was accustomed to. No: there was something else, something in the choral thought pattern that was not quite right. Something—something ever so slightly wrong.

Sar Gum studied the herd leader closely. The leader seemed uneasy too. Not actually worried; it was impossible for a Bounder to worry. Just uneasy—faintly, undefinably.

But why, Sar Gum wondered—why should that be? This was a perfectly straightforward exploration assignment. Nothing tricky. The home planet, Rock, was becoming so crowded with people and industries that there was no longer enough room for dumping wastes. The Rock government had elected to build a giant matter transmitter so as to discharge all of Rock's rubbish, sewage and other wastes out into space. Matter transmission was, of course, a delicate engineering proposition. There had to be a dense body of the correct mass, magnetic structure and other physical properties at the receiving end of the transmission channel. This hideous green planet fitted the requirements precisely. This world was to become the municipal dump for the planet, Rock.

Provided, of course, that there were no intelligent beings living here. It would be unthinkable to subject intelligent beings to a continual rain of food wastes, broken utensils and all the other kinds of garbage that were to be fed into the transmitter.

"Let me now ask for your report," Sar Gum communicated to the herd leader. "Are there intelligent beings here?"

"No," said the leader promptly.

Sar Gum couldn't shake his feeling of unease. The assembled Bounders were all staring at him with their huge round eyes. They were too quiet.

"Are you sure?" Sar Gum asked. "Absolutely sure?"

"Sure," replied the leader. "Sure I'm sure."

Sar Gum made a gesture something like a shrug. He went forward to tell Stig Hop that the exploration was completed.

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In which R. A. Lafferty (HOG-BELLY HONEY, F&SF, September 1965) mlends a bit of cockeyed Pawnee magic and a mixed-up bag of contemporary homesteaders into one of his distinctive and funny stories.

NARROW VALLEY

by R. A. Lafferty

IN THE YEAR 1893, LAND ALlotments in severalty were made to the remaining eight hundred and twenty-one Pawnee Indians. Each would receive one hundred and sixty acres of land and no more, and thereafter the Pawnees would be expected to pay taxes on their land, the same as the White-Eyes did.

"Kitkehahke!" Clarence Big-Saddle cussed. "You can't kick a dog around proper on a hundred and sixty acres. And I sure am not hear before about this pay taxes on land."

Clarence Big-Saddle selected a nice green valley for his allotment. It was one of the half dozen plots he had always regarded as his own. He sodded around the summer lodge that he had there and made it an all-season home. But he sure didn't intend to pay taxes on it.

So he burned leaves and bark and made a speech:

"That my valley be always wide and flourish and green and such stuff as that!" he orated in Pawnee chant style, "but that it be narrow if an intruder come."

He didn't have any balsam bark to burn. He threw on a little cedar bark instead. He didn't have any elder leaves. He used a handful of jack-oak leaves. And he forgot the word. How you going to work it if you forget the word?

"Petahauerat!" he howled out with the confidence he hoped would fool the fates.

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"That's about the same long of a word," he said in a low aside to himself. But he was doubtful. "What am I, a White Man, a burr-tailed jack, a new kind of nut to think it will work?" he asked. "I have to laugh at me. Oh well, we see."

He threw the rest of the bark and the leaves on the fire, and he hollered the wrong word out again.

And he was answered by a dazzling sheet of summer lightning.

"Skidi!" Clarence Big-Saddle swore. "It worked. I didn't think it would."

Clarence Big-Saddle lived on his land for many years, and he paid no taxes. Intruders were unable to come down to his place. The land was sold for taxes three times, but nobody ever came down to claim it. Finally, it was carried as open land on the books. Homesteaders filed on it several times, but none of them fulfilled the qualification of living on the land.

Half a century went by. Clarence Big-Saddle called his son.

"I've had it, boy," he said. "I think I'll just go in the house and die."

"O.K. dad," the son Clarence Little-Saddle said. "I'm going in to town to shoot a few games of pool with the boys. I'll bury you when I get back this evening."

So the son Clarence Little-Saddle inherited. He also lived on the land for many years without paying taxes.

There was a disturbance in the courthouse one day. The place seemed to be invaded in force, but actually there were but one man, one woman, and five children. "I'm Robert Rampart," said the man, "and we want the Land Office."

"I'm Robert Rampart Junior," said a nine year old gangler, "and we want it pretty blamed quick."

"I don't think we have anything like that," the girl at the desk said. "Isn't that something they had a long time ago?"

"Ignorance is no excuse for inefficiency, my dear," said Mary Mabel Rampart, an eight year old who could easily pass for eight and a half. "After I make my report, I wonder who will be sitting at your desk tomorrow?"

"You people are either in the wrong state or the wrong century," the girl said.

"The Homestead Act still obtains," Robert Rampart insisted. "There is one tract of land carried as open in this county. I want to file on it."

Cecilia Rampart answered the knowing wink of a beefy man at a distant desk. "Hi," she breathed as she slinked over. "I'm Cecilia Rampart, but my stage name is Cecilia San Juan. Do you think that seven is too young to play ingenue roles?"

"Not for you," the man said. "Tell your folks to come over here."

"Do you know where the Land Office is?" Cecilia asked.

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"Sure. It's the fourth left-hand drawer of my desk. The smallest office we got in the whole courthouse. We don't use it much any more."

The Ramparts gathered around. The beefy man started to make out the papers.

"This is the land description —" Robert Rampart began, "— why, you've got it down already. How did you know?"

"I've been around here a long time," the man answered.

They did the paper work, and Robert Rampart filed on the land.

"You won't be able to come onto the land itself, though," the man said.

"Why won't I?" Rampart demanded. "Isn't the land description accurate?"

"Oh, I suppose so. But nobody's ever been able to get to the land. It's become a sort of joke."

"Well, I intend to get to the bottom of that joke," Rampart insisted. "I will occupy the land, or I will find out why not."

"I'm not sure about that," the beefy man said. "The last man to file on the land, about a dozen years ago, wasn't able to occupy the land. And he wasn't able to say why he couldn't. It's kind of interesting, the look on their faces after they try it for a day or two, and then give it up."

The Ramparts left the courthouse, loaded into their camper, and drove out to find their land. They stopped at the house of a cattle and wheat farmer named Charley Dublin. Dublin met them with a grin which indicated he had been tipped off.

"Come along if you want to, folks," Dublin said. "The easiest way is on foot across my short pasture here. Your land's directly west of mine."

They walked the short distance to the border.

"My name is Tom Rampart, Mr. Dublin." Six year old Tom made conversation as they walked. "But my name is really Ramires, and not Tom. I am the issue of an indiscretion of my mother in Mexico several years ago."

"The boy is a kidder, Mr. Dublin," said the mother Nina Rampart, defending herself. "I have never been in Mexico, but sometimes I have the urge to disappear there forever."

"Ah yes, Mrs. Rampart. And what is the name of the youngest boy here?" Charles Dublin asked.

"Fatty," said Fatty Rampart.

"But surely that is not your given name?"

"Audifax," said five year old Fatty.

"Ah well, Audifax, Fatty, are you a kidder too?"

"He's getting better at it, Mr. Dublin," Mary Mabel said. "He was a twin till last week. His twin was named Skinny. Mama left Skinny unguarded while she was out tippling, and there were

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wild dogs in the neighborhood. When mama got back, do you know what was left of Skinny? Two neck bones and an ankle bone. That was all."

"Poor Skinny," Dublin said. "Well, Rampart, this is the fence and the end of my land. Yours is just beyond."

"Is that ditch on my land?" Rampart asked.

"That ditch *is* your land."

"I'll have it filled in. It's a dangerous deep cut even if it is narrow. And the other fence looks like a good one, and I sure have a pretty plot of land beyond it."

"No, Rampart, the land beyond the second fence belongs to Holister Hyde," Charley Dublin said. "That second fence is the *end* of your land."

"Now, just wait a minute, Dublin! There's something wrong here. My land is one hundred and sixty acres, which would be a half mile on a side. Where's my half mile width?"

"Between the two fences."

"That's not eight feet."

"Doesn't look like it, does it, Rampart? Tell you what—there's plenty of throwing-sized rocks around. Try to throw one across it."

"I'm not interested in any such boys' games," Rampart exploded. "I want my land."

But the Rampart children *were* interested in such games. They got with it with those throwing rocks. They winged them out over the little gully. The stones acted funny. They hung in the air, as it were, and diminished in size. And they were small as pebbles when they dropped down, down into the gully. None of them could throw a stone across that ditch, and they were throwing kids.

"You and your neighbor have conspired to fence open land for your own use," Rampart charged.

"No such thing, Rampart," Dublin said cheerfully. "My land checks perfectly. So does Hyde's. So does yours, if we knew how to check it. It's like one of those trick topological drawings. It really is a half mile from here to there, but the eye gets lost somewhere. It's your land. Crawl through the fence and figure it out."

Rampart crawled through the fence, and drew himself up to jump the gully. Then he hesitated. He got a glimpse of just how deep that gully was. Still, it wasn't five feet across.

There was a heavy fence post on the ground, designed for use as a corner post. Rampart up-ended it with some effort. Then he shoved it to fall and bridge the gully. But it fell short, and it shouldn't have. An eight foot post should bridge a five foot gully.

The post fell into the gully, and rolled and rolled and rolled. It spun as though it were rolling outward, but it made no progress except vertically. The post came

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to rest on a ledge of the gully, so close that Rampart could almost reach out and touch it, but it now appeared no bigger than a match stick.

"There is something wrong with that fence post, or with the world, or with my eyes," Robert Rampart said. "I wish I felt dizzy so I could blame it on that."

"There's a little game that I sometimes play with my neighbor Hyde when we're both out," Dublin said. "I've a heavy rifle and I train it on the middle of his forehead as he stands on the other side of the ditch apparently eight feet away. I fire it off then (I'm a good shot), and I hear it whine across. It'd kill him dead if things were as they seem. But Hyde's in no danger. The shot always bangs into that little scuff of rocks and boulders about thirty feet below him. I can see it kick up the rock dust there, and the sound of it rattling into those little boulders comes back to me in about two and a half seconds."

A bull-bat (poor people call it the night-hawk) raveled around in the air and zoomed out over the narrow ditch, but it did not reach the other side. The bird dropped below ground level and could be seen against the background of the other side of the ditch. It grew smaller and hazier as though at a distance of three or four hundred yards. The white bars on its wings could no longer be discerned; then the bird itself could hardly be discerned; but it was far short of the other side of the five foot ditch.

A man identified by Charley Dublin as the neighbor Hollister Hyde had appeared on the other side of the little ditch. Hyde grinned and waved. He shouted something, but could not be heard.

"Hyde and I both read mouth," Dublin said, "so we can talk across the ditch easy enough. Which kid wants to play chicken? Hyde will barrel a good-sized rock right at your head, and if you duck or flinch you're chicken."

"Me! Me!" Audifax Rampart challenged. And Hyde, a big man with big hands, did barrel a fearsome jagged rock right at the head of the boy. It would have killed him if things had been as they appeared. But the rock diminished to nothing and disappeared into the ditch. Here was a phenomenon—things seemed real-sized on either side of the ditch, but they diminished coming out over the ditch either way.

"Everybody game for it?" Robert Rampart Junior asked.

"We won't get down there by standing here," Mary Mabel said.

"Nothing wenchered, nothing gained," said Cecilia. "I got that from an add for a sex comedy."

Then the five Rampart kids ran down into the gully. Ran *down* is right. It was almost as if they ran down the vertical face of a cliff. They couldn't do that. The

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gully was no wider than the stride of the biggest kids. But the gully diminished those children, it ate them alive. They were doll-sized. They were acorn-sized. They were running for minute after minute across a ditch that was only five feet across. They were going deeper in it, and getting smaller. Robert Rampart was roaring his alarm, and his wife Nina was screaming. Then she stopped. "What am I carrying on so loud about?" she asked herself. "It looks like fun. I'll do it too."

She plunged into the gully, diminished in size as the children had done, and ran at a pace to carry her a hundred yards away across a gully only five feet wide.

That Robert Rampart stirred things up for a while then. He got the sheriff there, and the highway patrolmen. A ditch had stolen his wife and five children, he said, and maybe had killed them. And if anybody laughs, there may be another killing. He got the colonel of the State National Guard there, and a command post set up. He got a couple of airplane pilots. Robert Rampart had one quality: when he hollered, people came.

He got the newsmen out from T-Town, and the eminent scientists, Dr. Velikof Vonk, Arpad Arkabaranan, and Willy McGilly. That bunch turns up every time you get on a good one. They just happen to be in that part of the country where something interesting is going on.

They attacked the thing from all four sides and the top, and by inner and outer theory. If a thing measures a half mile on each side, and the sides are straight, there just has to be something in the middle of it. They took pictures from the air, and they turned out perfect. They proved that Robert Rampart had the prettiest hundred and sixty acres in the country, the larger part of it being a lush green valley, and all of it being a half mile on a side, and situated just where it should be. They took ground-level photos then, and it showed a beautiful half mile stretch of land between the boundaries of Charley Dublin and Holister Hyde. But a man isn't a camera. None of them could see that beautiful spread with the eyes in their heads. Where was it?

Down in the valley itself everything was normal. It really was a half mile wide and no more than eighty feet deep with a very gentle slope. It was warm and sweet, and beautiful with grass and grain.

Nina and the kids loved it, and they rushed to see what squatter had built that little house on their land. A house, or a shack. It had never known paint, but paint would have spoiled it. It was built of split timbers dressed near smooth with axe and draw knife, chinked with white clay, and sodded up to about half its height. And there was an interloper standing by the little lodge.

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"Here, here what are you doing on our land?" Robert Rampart Junior demanded of the man. "Now you just shamble off again wherever you came from. I'll bet you're a thief too, and those cattle are stolen."

"Only the black-and-white calf," Clarence Little-Saddle said. "I couldn't resist him, but the rest are mine. I guess I'll just stay around and see that you folks get settled all right."

"Is there any wild Indians around here?" Fatty Rampart asked.

"No, not really. I go on a bender about every three months and get a little bit wild, and there's a couple Osage boys from Gray Horse that get noisy sometimes, but that's about all," Clarence Little-Saddle said.

"You certainly don't intend to palm yourself off on us as an Indian." Mary Mabel challenged. "You'll find us a little too knowledgeable for that."

"Little girl, you as well tell this cow there's no room for her to be a cow since you're so knowledgeable. She thinks she's a short-horn cow named Sweet Virginia. I think I'm a Pawnee Indian named Clarence. Break it to us real gentle if we're not."

"If you're an Indian where's your war bonnet? There's not a feather on you anywhere."

"How you be sure? There's a story that we got feathers instead of hair on— Aw, I can't tell a joke like that to a little girl! How come you're not wearing the Iron Crown of Lombardy if you're a white girl? How you expect me to believe you're a little white girl and your folks came from Europe a couple hundred years ago if you don't wear it? There were six hundred tribes, and only one of them, the Oglala Sioux, had the war bonnet, and only the big leaders, never more than two or three of them alive at one time, wore it."

"Your analogy is a little strained," Mary Mabel said. "Those Indians we saw in Florida and the ones at Atlantic City had war bonnets, and they couldn't very well have been the kind of Sioux you said. And just last night on the TV in the motel, those Massachusetts Indians put a war bonnet on the President and called him the Great White Father. You mean to tell me that they were all phonies? Hey, who's laughing at who here?"

"If you're an Indian where's your bow and arrow?" Tom Rampart interrupted. "I bet you can't even shoot one."

"You're sure right there," Clarence admitted. "I never shot one of those things but once in my life. They used to have an archery range in Boulder Park over in T-Town, and you could rent the things and shoot at targets tied to hay bales. Hey, I barked my whole forearm and nearly broke my

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thumb when the bow-string thwacked home. I couldn't shoot that thing at all. I don't see how anybody ever could shoot one of them."

"O.K. kids," Nina Rampart called to her brood. "Let's start pitching this junk out of the shack so we can move in. Is there any way we can drive our camper down here, Clarence?"

"Sure, there's a pretty good dirt road, and it's a lot wider than it looks from the top. I got a bunch of green bills in an old night charley in the shack. Let me get them, and then I'll clear out for a while. The shack hasn't been cleaned out for seven years, since the last time this happened. I'll show you the road to the top, and you can bring your car down it."

"Hey you old Indian, you lied!" Cecilia Rampart shrilled from the doorway of the shack. "You *do* have a war bonnet. Can I have it?"

"I didn't mean to lie, I forgot about that thing," Clarence Little-Saddle said. "My son Clarence Bare-Back sent that to me from Japan for a joke a long time ago. Sure, you can have it."

All the children were assigned tasks carrying the junk out of the shack and setting fire to it. Nina Rampart and Clarence Little-Saddle ambled up to the rim of the valley by the vehicle road that was wider than it looked from the top.

"Nina, you're back! I thought you were gone forever," Robert Rampart jittered at seeing her again. "What—where are the children?"

"Why, I left them down in the valley, Robert. That is, ah, down in that little ditch right there. Now you've got me worried again. I'm going to drive the camper down there and unload it. You'd better go on down and lend a hand too, Robert, and quit talking to all these funny-looking men here."

And Nina went back to Dublin's place for the camper.

"It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for that intrepid woman to drive a car down into that narrow ditch," the eminent scientist Dr. Velikof Vonk said.

"You know how that camel does it?" Clarence Little-Saddle offered, appearing of a sudden from nowhere. "He just closes one of his own eyes and flops back his ears and plunges right through. A camel is mighty narrow when he closes one eye and flops back his ears. Besides, they use a big-eyed needle in the act."

"Where'd this crazy man come from?" Robert Rampart demanded, jumping three feet in the air. "Things are coming out of the ground now. I want my land! I want my children! I want my wife! Whoops, here she comes driving it. Nina you can't drive a loaded camper into a little ditch like that! You'll be killed or collapsed!"

Nina Rampart drove the loaded

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camper into the little ditch at a pretty good rate of speed. The best of belief is that she just closed one eye and plunged right through. The car diminished and dropped, and it was smaller than a toy car. But it raised a pretty good cloud of dust as it bumped for several hundred yards across a ditch that was only five feet wide.

"Rampart, it's akin to the phenomenon known as looming, only in reverse," the eminent scientist Arpad Arkabaranan explained as he attempted to throw a rock across the narrow ditch. The rock rose very high in the air, seemed to hang at its apex while it diminished to the size of a grain of sand, and then fell into the ditch not six inches of the way across. There isn't anybody going to throw across a half mile valley even if it looks five feet. "Look at a rising moon sometime, Rampart. It appears very large, as though covering a great sector of the horizon, but it only covers one half of a degree. It is hard to believe that you could set seven hundred and twenty of such large moons side by side around the horizon, or that it would take one hundred and eighty of the big things to reach from the horizon to a point overhead. It is also hard to believe that your valley is five hundred times as wide as it appears, but it has been surveyed, and it is."

"I want my land. I want my children. I want my wife," Robert chanted dully. "Damn, I let her get away again."

"I tell you, Rampy," Clarence Little-Saddle squared on him, "a man that lets his wife get away twice doesn't deserve to keep her. I give you till nightfall; then you forfeit. I've taken a liking to the brood. One of us is going to be down there tonight."

After a while a bunch of them were off in that little tavern on the road between Cleveland and Osage. It was only a half mile away. If the valley had run in the other direction, it would have been only six feet away.

"It is a psychic nexus in the form of an elongated dome," said the eminent scientist Dr. Velikof Vonk. "It is maintained subconsciously by the concatenation of at least two minds, the stronger of them belonging to a man dead for many years. It has apparently existed for a little less than a hundred years, and in another hundred years it will be considerably weakened. We know from our checking out of folk tales of Europe as well as Cambodia that these ensorceled areas seldom survive for more than two hundred and fifty years. The person who first set such a thing in being will usually lose interest in it, and in all worldly things, within a hundred years of his own death. This is a simple thanatopsychic limitation. As a short-term device, the thing has been used several times as a military tactic.

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"This psychic nexus, as long as it maintains itself, causes group illusion, but it is really a simple thing. It doesn't fool birds or rabbits or cattle or cameras, only humans. There is nothing meteorological about it. It is strictly psychological. I'm glad I was able to give a scientific explanation to it or it would have worried me."

"It is continental fault coinciding with a noospheric fault," said the eminent scientist Arpad Arkabaranan. "The valley really is a half mile wide, and at the same time it really is only five feet wide. If we measured correctly, we would get these dual measurements. Of course it is meteorological! Everything including dreams is meteorological. It is the animals and cameras which are fooled, as lacking a true dimension; it is only humans who see the true duality. The phenomenon should be common along the whole continental fault where the earth gains or loses a half mile that has to go somewhere. Likely it extends through the whole sweep of the Cross Timbers. Many of those trees appear twice, and many do not appear at all. A man in the proper state of mind could farm that land or raise cattle on it, but it doesn't really exist. There is a clear parallel in the Luftspiegelungthal sector in the Black Forest of Germany which exists, or does not exist, according to the circumstances and to the attitude of the beholder. Then we have the case of Mad Mountain in Morgan County, Tennessee, which isn't there all the time, and also the Little Lobo Mirage south of Presidio, Texas, from which twenty thousand barrels of water were pumped in one two-and-a-half period before the mirage reverted to mirage status. I'm glad I was able to give a scientific explanation to this or it would have worried me."

"I just don't understand how he worked it," said the eminent scientist Willy McGilly. "Cedar bark, jack-oak leaves, and the word 'Petahauerat.' The thing's impossible! When I was a boy and we wanted to make a hide-out, we used bark from the skunk-spruce tree, the leaves of a box-elder, and the word was 'Boadicea'. All three elements are wrong here. I cannot find a scientific explanation for it, and it does worry me."

They went back to Narrow Valley. Robert Rampart was still chanting dully: "I want my land. I want my children. I want my wife."

Nina Rampart came chugging up out of the narrow ditch in the camper and emerged through that little gate a few yards down the fence row.

"Supper's ready and we're tired of waiting for you, Robert," she said. "A fine homesteader you are! Afraid to come onto your own land! Come along now, I'm tired of waiting for you."

"I want my land! I want my

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children! I want my wife!" Robert Rampart still chanted. "Oh, there you are, Nina. You stay here this time. I want my land! I want my children! I want an answer to this terrible thing."

"It is time we decided who wears the pants in this family," Nina said stoutly. She picked up her husband, slung him over her shoulder, carried him to the camper and dumped him in, slammed (as it seemed) a dozen doors at once, and drove furiously down into Narrow Valley, which already seemed wider.

Why, that place was getting normaler and normaler by the minute! Pretty soon it looked almost as wide as it was supposed to be. The psychic nexus in the form of an elongated dome had collapsed. The continental fault that coincided with the noospheric fault had faced facts and decided to conform. The Ramparts were in effective possession of their homestead, and Narrow Valley was as normal as any place anywhere.

"I have lost my land," Clarence Little-Saddle moaned. "It was the land of my father Clarence Big-Saddle, and I meant it to be the land of my son Clarence Bare-Back. It looked so narrow that people did not notice how wide it was, and people did not try to enter it. Now I have lost it."

Clarence Little-Saddle and the eminent scientist Willy McGilly were standing on the edge of Narrow Valley, which now appeared its true half-mile extent. The moon was just rising, so big that it filled a third of the sky. Who would have imagined that it would take a hundred and eighty of such monstrous things to reach from the horizon to a point overhead, and yet you could sight it with sighters and figure it so.

"I had the little bear-cat by the tail and I let go," Clarence groaned. "I had a fine valley for free, and I have lost it. I am like that hard-luck guy in the funny-paper or Job in the Bible. Destitution is my lot."

Willy McGilly looked around furtively. They were alone on the edge of the half mile wide valley.

"Let's give it a booster shot," Willy McGilly said.

Hey, those two got with it! They started a snapping fire and began to throw the stuff onto it. Bark from the dog-elm tree—how do you know it won't work?

It *was* working! Already the other side of the valley seemed a hundred yards closer, and there were alarmed noises coming up from the people in the valley.

Leaves from a black locust tree—and the valley narrowed still more! There was, moreover, terrified screaming of both children and big people from the depths of Narrow Valley, and the happy voice of Mary Mabel Rampart chanting "Earthquake! Earthquake!"

"That my valley be always wide

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and flourish and such stuff, and green with money and grass!" Clarence Little-Saddle orated in Pawnee chant style, "but that it be narrow if intruders come, smash them like bugs!"

People, that valley wasn't over a hundred feet wide now, and the screaming of the people in the bottom of the valley had been joined by the hysterical coughing of the camper car starting up.

Willy and Clarence threw everything that was left on the fire. But the word? The word? Who remembers the word?

"Corsicanatexas!" Clarence Little-Saddle howled out with confidence he hoped would fool the fates.

He was answered, not only by a dazzling sheet of summer lightning, but also by thunder and rain drops.

"Chahiksi!" Clarence Little-Saddle swore. "It worked. I didn't think it would. It will be all right now. I can use the rain."

The valley was again a ditch only five feet wide.

The camper car struggled out of narrow valley through the little gate. It was smashed flat as a sheet of paper, and the screaming kids and people in it had only one dimension.

"It's closing in! It's closing in!" Robert Rampart roared, and he was no thicker than if he had been made out of cardboard.

"We're smashed like bugs," the Rampart boys intoned. "We're thin like paper."

Mort, ruine, ecrasement!" spoke-acted Cecilia Rampart like the great tragedienne she was.

"Help! Help!" Nina Rampart croaked, but she winked at Willy and Clarence as they rolled by. "This homesteading jag always did leave me a little flat."

"Don't throw those paper dolls away. They might be the Ramparts," Mary Mabel called.

The camper car coughed again and bumped along on level ground. This couldn't last forever. The car was widening out as it bumped along.

"Did we overdo it, Clarence?" Willy McGilly asked. "What did one flat-lander say to the other?"

"Dimension of us never got around," Clarence said. "No, I don't think we overdid it, Willy. That car must be eighteen inches wide already, and they all ought to be normal by the time they reach the main road. The next time I do it, I think I'll throw woodgrain plastic on the fire to see who's kidding who."

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SCIENCE

I'M LOOKING OVER A FOUR-LEAF CLOVER

by Isaac Asimov

HISTORY IS FULL OF APOCRYPHAL stories; stories about people saying and doing things they never really said and did—like George Washington chopping down the cherry-tree, or Galileo dropping weights off the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Unfortunately, apocryphal stories are so much more interesting than the truth that it is impossible to kill them. And what's even more unfortunate for me, specifically, is that my memory is so selective that I never forget an apocryphal story, even though I frequently have trouble remembering facts.

For instance, here's a story, probably apocryphal (or I wouldn't remember it so tenaciously) about St. Augustine.

He was asked once, by a scoffer, "What did God spend His time doing before He created Heaven and Earth?"

And St. Augustine roared back, without hesitation, "Creating Hell, for those who ask questions like that!"

But I hope St. Augustine was just joshing when he said that, for having talked about the conservation laws two articles ago and about the expanding Universe one article ago, it is now time to discuss my theories as to the birth and development of the Universe in the light of the conservation laws; and to do that I will (among other things) have to ask that unaskable question—what came before the beginning?

I ended last month's article with the picture of an oscillating Universe; one that first expands, then contracts, then expands, then contracts and so on over and over again, with each cycle of expansion and contraction taking some eighty billion years, and with an extremely dense "cosmic egg" at the point of maximum contraction in each cycle.

In continuing the discussion, let's begin by asking whether all the

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cycles are identical, or whether there is some change from cycle to cycle; perhaps a steady, one-way change.

For instance, we might argue that as the Universe expands, it radiates massless particles—photons and neutrinos—constantly. These photons and neutrinos, we can say, move outward and are forever lost. When the Universe contracts again, the mass that comes together into a cosmic egg is smaller by the loss of the mass-equivalent of the energy represented by the lost radiation. This would continue with each cycle; each cosmic egg being less massive than the one before, until finally, a cosmic egg is formed that possesses so little mass that it can no longer explode properly. When that happens the entire Universe is represented by one extremely large but slowly dying mass of condensed matter.

In that case, we would be living not merely in an oscillating Universe but in a damped oscillating one. The Universe, in that view, would be like a bouncing ball that is not very elastic. Each bounce is lower than the one before and finally the ball does not bounce at all but just lies there.

That is rather a neat picture for it produces a logical end, the kind of an end we are familiar with in ordinary life and one we might therefore be disposed to accept. But suppose we look backward in time? What about the cosmic egg that existed before the one that started the present expansion? That earlier one had to be larger than ours; and the one before that had to be even larger; and the one before that still larger. To move back in time and find ever larger cosmic eggs, exploding with ever-greater violence is troublesome, for an endlessly increasing mass may be hard to handle. The damped oscillating Universe produces a neat overall end but no neat overall beginning.

Fortunately, we don't have to complicate matters by picturing such a damped oscillation. Photons and neutrinos are not "forever lost." To be sure, they move outward from their source of radiation in a straight line" but what do we mean by a "straight line?" Suppose we draw a straight line on the surface of the Earth. It might seem to us that if we extend that line with perfect straightness, it will go on and on forever and that a point travelling along it will be "forever lost" to anyone standing at the place of origin of the line. However, you know and I know that the Earth's surface is curved and that the "straight line" will eventually (if we assume the Earth to be a perfect sphere) come back to the place of origin.

In the same way, photons and neutrinos, in travelling a "straight line" by our local-neighborhood-of-the-Universe definition are actu-

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ally travelling in a grand circle and will return, roughly speaking, to the point of origin. The Universe of "curved space" has a finite volume and all it contains, matter and energy, must remain within that volume.

As the Universe contracts, not only matter, but also photons and neutrinos must be crowded together. The massless particles are still travelling in "straight lines" but these "straight lines" curve ever more sharply; and in the end all the contents of the previous cosmic egg are brought back into another cosmic egg, with nothing lost. Each cosmic egg is precisely like the one before and the one that will come after and there is no damping. In a strictly oscillating Universe of this sort, there is neither beginning nor end, *nor on the whole,* any change. If this faces us with the uncomfortable concept of eternity, it is at least an essentially unchanging eternity.

Within a single cycle of the oscillation, of course, there is a beginning at one cosmic egg, and end at the next, and colossal change in between.

But what is the nature of the cosmic egg? That depends on the nature of the Universe. On the subatomic scale, our portion of the Universe is made up, in the main, of six kinds of particles: protons, electrons, neutrons, photons, neutrinos and antineutrinos. The other particles that exist are present in vanishingly small traces on the whole and may be ignored.

The subatomic particles are associated into atoms at the moment and these atoms are associated into stars and galaxies. We can assume that the six kinds of particles that make up our part of the Universe make up all of it and that even the farthest galaxy is essentially similar in fundamental makeup to our own bodies.

As all the mass and energy of the Universe crunch together into the cosmic egg, the levels of organization of the Universe break down, one by one. The galaxies and stars come together in one contracting mass. The more complicated atoms decompose into hydrogen, absorbing neutrinos and photons as they do so. The hydrogen atoms break apart into protons and electrons, absorbing antineutrinos as they do so.

In the end, the Universe has been converted into a cosmic egg made up of a mass of hard-packed neutrons—a mass of "neutronium."

Well-packed neutronium would have a density of about 400,000,000,000,000 grams per cubic centimeter, so that if the mass of the Sun were packed into neutronium, it would form a sphere with a radius of about 6.6 miles.

If we consider that the mass of the Milky Way Galaxy is about

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135,000,000,000 times that of the Sun, then the whole of our Galaxy, converted into neutronium, would form a sphere with a radius of about 33,600 miles.

If we consider the Universe to contain a mass 100,000,000,000 times that of our Galaxy, then the cosmic egg would have a radius of 156,000,000 miles. If the center of such a cosmic egg were made to coincide with the center of our Sun, the surface of the cosmic egg would almost coincide with the orbit of Mars. And even if the mass of the Universe were twenty thousand times as large as the mass I have cited, the cosmic egg, if it were composed of pure, well-packed neutronium, would be no larger than the orbit of Pluto.

How does the cosmic egg fit in with the conservation laws discussed in BALANCING THE BOOKS? (F & SF, July 1966) Well—in a very interesting fashion.

One can easily imagine that the momentum of the cosmic egg as a whole is zero, by defining the egg as motionless. When the cosmic egg explodes and expands, the individual portions have momentum in one direction or another, but all the momenta add up to zero. In the same way, the angular momentum of the cosmic egg can be defined as zero and while the parts of the expanding universe have individual angular momenta that are not zero, the total is zero.

In short, it is tempting to try to establish a rule that for any conserved quantity, the value of that quantity in the cosmic egg is zero, or is capable of being defined as zero without logical difficulties.

Since this notion is, as far as I know, original with me—especially in the manner I intend to develop it in the course of this article—I shall throw modesty to the dogs and speak of it as "Asimov's Cosmogonic Principle."

The most economical way of expressing the principle, is—"In the Beginning, there was Nothing."

For instance, how about the conservation of electric charge? Of the six particles making up the Universe, one (the proton) has a positive charge and one (the electron) has a negative charge. In forming the cosmic egg, the two combine to form neutrons and the electric charge of the cosmic egg is then zero. (In the Beginning, there was No Charge.)

In the course of the explosion and expansion of the cosmic egg, charge appears, to be sure, but in equal quantities of positive and negative so that the total remains zero.

And what about lepton number (see BALANCING THE BOOKS). Of the six particles making up the Universe, three are leptons. The

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electron and the neutrino have lepton numbers of +1, while the antineutrino has a lepton number of −1. In the formation of neutrons, all three disappear, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the manner of the disappearance is such as to cancel out the lepton number and leave the cosmic egg with a lepton number of zero.

On the whole, one can arrange matters to show that the values of all but two of the conserved quantities known to physicists are zero in the cosmic egg, or can logically be defined as zero. The two exceptions are baryon number and energy.

Let's begin with the baryon number.

Of the six particles making up the Universe, two are baryons, the proton and the neutron. Each has a baryon number of +1. Since there is no particle with a baryon number of −1 in the list of those making up the Universe, there is no chance of cancellation of baryon number, and no chance (or so it would now appear) of a cosmic egg possessing a baryon number of zero. In the process of cosmic egg formation, the protons disappear, to be sure, but for each proton that disappears, a neutron is formed and the baryon number remains positive.

Indeed, if the cosmic egg contains the mass of 100,000,000,000 galaxies the size of ours, then it is made up of 1.6×10^{79} baryons and its baryon number is +16,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. This is a terribly long way from zero and makes hash of Asimov's Cosmogonic Principle.

There's a way out. There are particles with negative baryon numbers, even if those do not seem to occur in any but the tiniest traces in our neck of the woods. The antineutron, for instance, has a baryon number of −1, Well, suppose that the cosmic egg does not consist of neutrons only, but of neutrons and antineutrons, half and half. The baryon number would then be zero, as the Principle requires.

The neutron half of the cosmic egg would explode to form protons and electrons which would combine to form atoms. The antineutron half would explode to form antiprotons and antielectrons (positrons) which would combine to form antiatoms.

In short, we have now talked ourselves into supposing that the Universe is made up of equal quantities of matter and antimatter—but is it? It is absolutely inconceivable that the Universe be made up of matter and antimatter all mixed up, for if it were, the two would interact at once to produce photons. (That's exactly what happens when we, by might and main, produce a trifling quantity of antimatter in the

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laboratory.) A Universe composed of equal quantities of matter and antimatter, all mixed up, would actually be composed of a mass of photons, which are neither matter nor antimatter. The cosmic egg would be nothing more than compacted photons.

But the Universe is *not* made up of photons only. If, then, it is made up of equal quantities of matter and antimatter, those must be separated—effectively separated—so that they do not interact to form photons. The only separation that is separate enough would be on the galactic scale. In other words, there may be galaxies made up of matter, and other galaxies made up of antimatter. Galaxies and antigalaxies, so to speak.

We have no way of telling, so far, whether the Universe actually contains galaxies and antigalaxies. If a galaxy and an antigalaxy met, enormous quantities of energy would be formed as matter-antimatter annihilation took place. No clear-cut case of such an event has yet been detected, though there are some suspicious cases. Secondly, galaxies produce vast quantities of neutrinos as the hydrogen atoms are built up to helium in the stars they contain; while antigalaxies produce vast quantities of antineutrinos by way of the analogous process involving antimatter. When the day comes that astronomers can detect neutrinos and antineutrinos from distant galaxies, and pinpoint their sources—the galaxies and antigalaxies may be identified.

In a Universe made up of galaxies and antigalaxies, we can picture the crunching together of the cosmic egg in a new way. Neutrons and antineutrons would be formed and would undergo mutual annihilation to form photons. We would have "photonium" in the cosmic egg, rather than neutronium. What its properties would be like, I can't imagine.

But what causes the photonium to break up into matter and antimatter in such a way that separate galaxies of each kind can be formed? Why doesn't the photonium break up into neutrons and antineutrons so well-mixed that they annihilate each other at once. In short, why isn't the photonium stable? Why doesn't it remain photonium?

Well, there are theories that an antiparticle is merely a particle that is moving backwards in time. If you take a film of a positron in a magnetic field, it seems to curve, let us say, leftward, rather than rightward, as an electron would under similar conditions. However, if the film is run backward, the positron curves rightward, like an electron.

On the subatomic scale, it makes no difference whether time moves "forward" or "backward" as far as the laws of nature are concerned and consistent pictures of subatomic events can be drawn up in which particles move forward in time and antiparticles move backward.

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Could it be then, that the photonium cosmic egg, with a baryon number of zero, breaks up into two smaller eggs, one of neutronium and one of antineutronium; and that the former moves forward in time and the latter backward, so that the two are out of reach of each other before they can interact? The neutronium egg with a positive baryon number can be called a "cosmon"; while the antineutronium egg with a negative baryon number can be called an "anticosmon."

We can picture the cosmon and anticosmon as both undergoing expansion and as continuing to separate along the time axis. We begin with a tiny cosmon and anticosmon, both close to the zero-point on the time axis. As they move apart, they grow larger and larger and more and more separated.

For the moment let's concentrate on the cosmon (our Universe). As it expands, the various forms of energy are spread out within it more and more evenly. We express this fact by saying that entropy increases (see ORDER! ORDER!, F & SF, February 1961) and, indeed, entropy has sometimes been called "time's arrow." If entropy increases, you know time is moving forward.

But when the cosmon begins to contract, all the atomic and subatomic processes that took place during expansion begin to reverse. Entropy then begins to decrease and time begins to run backward.

In other words the cosmon moves forward in time when it is expanding, and backward when it is contracting. The anticosmon (behaving symmetrically) moves backward in time when it is expanding, and forward in time when it is contracting. Each does this over and over again.

Instead of an oscillating Universe, we have an oscillating double-Universe, the two oscillations being exactly in phase, and both Universes coming together to form a combined cosmic egg of photonium.

But if this picture takes care of baryon number, it does not take care of energy. The law of conservation of energy is the most fundamental generalization we know and no matter how I have sliced things so far, the Universe, cosmon and anticosmon combined, is made up of energy.

If the cosmon consists of 1.6×10^{79} neutrons and their descendant particles, and the anticosmon consists of 1.6×10^{79} antineutrons and their descendant particles, then the total energy content of the photonium cosmic egg formed by the coming together of the cosmon and anticosmon must be something like 4.8×10^{76} ergs, and that must always exist, at all stages of the cosmon-anticosmon separation, expansion, contraction, and coalescence.

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That is the final hurdle for Asimov's Cosmogonic Principle, for in the photonium cosmic egg, all conserved quantities, *except* energy, can be set equal to zero.

How then can one set the energy equal to zero as well? To do so, one must postulate something we might call negative-energy.

There is no such thing *as far as we know*. It has never been observed. Nevertheless, the Principle makes its existence necessary.

In a Universe consisting only of negative-energy, all the manifestations would be broadly identical with those in our own Universe consisting of ordinary energy. However, if samples of ordinary energy and of negative-energy were brought together, they would cancel each other and produce Nothing.

There are familiar cases of partial cancellation of physical properties. Two billiard balls moving in opposite directions at equal speeds, and coated with glue to make them stick on collision, will, if they collide head-on, come to a dead halt. Momentum will have been cancelled out (but the energy of motion of the billiard balls will be converted to heat). Two sound beams, or light beams, exactly out of phase, will combine to form silence, or darkness (but the energy content of the wave-forms will be converted into heat).

In all these partial cancellations, the energy—most fundamental of all—always remains. Well, in the case of the combination of energy and negative-energy, cancellation will be complete. There will be left *Nothing!*

Negative-energy is made up of negative-photons, which can break down to form negative-neutrons and negative-antineutrons. The negative-neutrons can break down to form negative-matter which can be built up to negative-stars and negative-galaxies, forming a negative-cosmon. Negative-antineutrons can break down to form negative-antimatter which will build up to a negative-anticosmon.

Suppose a cosmon and anticosmon contract and combine to form a photonium cosmic egg. A negative-cosmon and a negative-anticosmon can contract to form an antiphotonium cosmic egg. The two cosmic eggs, photonium and antiphotonium can then combine to form Nothing!

We are then left with no cosmic egg at all! We are left with Nothing!

In the beginning was Nothing and this Nothing formed a photonium cosmic egg and an antiphotonium cosmic egg. The photonium cosmic egg behaves as already described, forming a cosmon moving forward in time and an anticosmon moving backward in time. The antiphotonium cosmic egg must behave analogously, forming a negative-cosmon moving forward in time and a negative-anticosmon moving backward in time.

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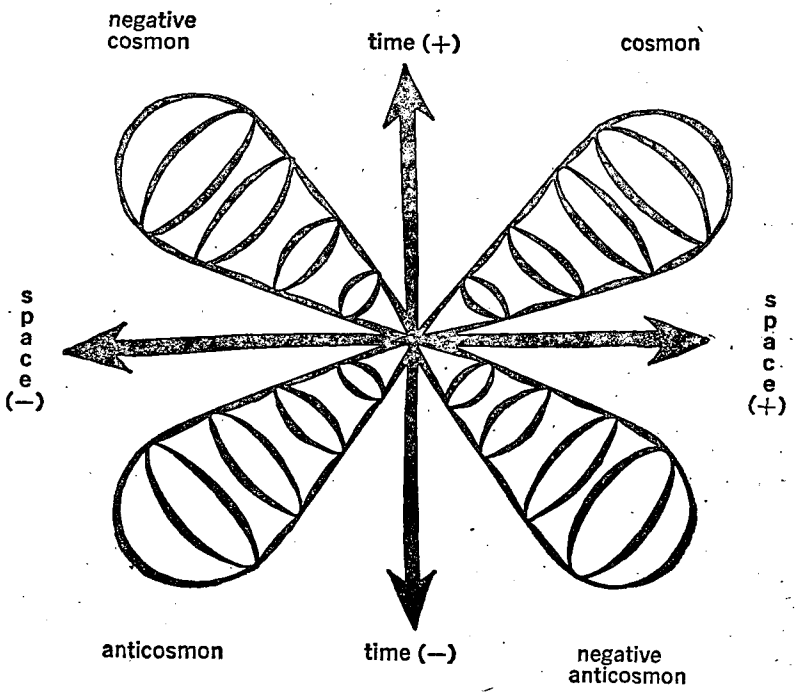
But if the cosmon and negative-cosmon are both moving forward in time why don't they combine and cancel out to Nothing? It seems to me they must remain separate and this separation may come about through gravitational repulsion. So far, we know of gravitational attraction only, and there is no such thing (as far as we know) as gravitational repulsion. If, however, there is negative-energy, and if negative-matter is formed from it, perhaps a gravitational repulsion can also exist and be expressed between matter and negative-matter.

As the cosmon and negative-cosmon expand, gravitational repulsion drives them steadily apart, perhaps, along the space axis (see Figure), while both move together up the time axis. Similarly, the anticosmon and negative-anticosmon drive steadily apart along the space axis as they move downward along the time-axis.

Figure—The Four-Leaf Clover



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As the Figure shows, the result is rather like a four-leaf clover (which is the significance of the title of this essay, in case you've been wondering).

Once the various Universes pass their expansion peak and begin to contract again, is it possible that not only time is reversed, but the gravitational effect as well? There are theories advanced by important physicists to the effect that gravitational force may be weakening with time. Could it be, therefore, that it reaches zero at expansion peak and that during contraction matter repels matter and negative-matter repels negative-matter, while matter attracts negative-matter?

You might object at once by asking how the cosmon, for instance, will contract, if all its parts experience a mutual repulsion. To which I reply, why not? Right now the cosmon is expanding even though all its parts experience a mutual attraction. Perhaps the cosmon and its sister-Universes are so arranged that the grand expansion or contraction is always in opposition to the force of gravity. The force of gravity is incredibly weak (see FIRST AND REARMOST, F & SF, October 1964), and it may be its fate always to be overborne by other forces and effects.

However, in the process of contraction, the overall gravitational attraction between cosmon and negative-cosmon on the one hand, and between anticosmon and negative-anticosmon on the other, may bring them together along the space-axis just as time-reversal brings them together along the time-axis.

When cosmon, anticosmon, negative-cosmon and negative-anticosmon all come together, they produce—Nothing.

In the Beginning, there is Nothing.

In the End, there is Nothing.

But if we begin with Nothing—why doesn't it stay Nothing?

Why should it? We can say that $0 + 0 = 0$, and that $+1 + (-1) = 0$. Both $0 + 0$ and $+ 1 + (- 1)$ are equivalent ways of saying "zero" and why should one be any more "real" or "natural" than the other? The situation can slide from Nothing to Four-Leaf Clover without difficulty, for no essential has been changed by that transition.

But why should the shift come at one time rather than another? The mere fact that it comes at a particular time means that something has made it shift.

Indeed? What do you mean by time? Time and space only exist in connection with the expansion and contraction of the leaves of the Four-Leaf Clover. When the leaves don't exist, neither does time nor space.

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In the Beginning, there is Nothing—not even time or space.

The Four-Leaf Clover comes into existence at no particular time and in no particular place. When it is in existence, time and space exist in a cycle of expansion and contraction that takes eighty billion years. There is then a timeless, spaceless interval and again an expansion and contraction. Since there is nothing we can do with a timeless, spaceless interval, we can eliminate it and consider the cycles of expansion and contraction to be following immediately upon one another. We then have an oscillating quadruple-Universe, an oscillating Four-Leaf Clover.

And who says only one need exist. There are no limits, no bounds, no ends, no edges to Nothingness. There may therefore be an infinite number of oscillating Four-Leaf Clovers, separated by something that is neither time nor space.

And here the mind boggles. I have gone as far as I care to, and I leave it to the Ardent Readers to carry matters further. For myself, enough (to coin a phrase) is enough.

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Zenna Henderson's stories of the visitors to Earth ('aliens' being an inappropriate description) known simply as 'The People', have long been one of the most popular and asked-for features of this magazine. It is with pleasure that we present here the latest story. (A second collection of Miss Henderson's stories, THE PEOPLE: NO DIFFERENT FLESH, *will be published by Doubleday early next year.)*

TROUBLING OF THE WATER

by Zenna Henderson

SOMETIMES IT'S LIKE BEING A castaway, being a first settler in a big land. If I were a little younger, maybe I'd play at being Robinson Crusoe, only I'd die of surprise if I found a footprint, especially a bare one, this place being where it is.

But it's not only being a castaway in a place, but in a time. I feel as though the last years of the century were ruffling up to my knees in a tide that will sweep me into the next century. If I live seven more years, I'll not only be of age but I'll see the Turn Of The Century! Imagine putting 19 in front of your years instead of 18! So, instead of playing Crusoe and scanning the horizon for sails, I used to stand on a rock and measure the world full circle, thinking —the Turn Of the Century! The Turn of the Century! And seeking and seeking as though time were a tide that would come racing through the land at midnight 1899 and that I could see the front edge of the tide beginning already!

But things have happened so fast recently that I'm not sure about Time or Place or Possible or Impossible any more. One thing I am sure of is the drought. It was real enough.

It's the responsibility of the men of the house to watch out for the welfare of the women of the house, so that day I went with Father up into the hills to find out where Sometime Creek started. We climbed up and up along the

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winding creek bed until my lungs pulled at the hot air and felt crackly clear down to their bottoms. We stopped and leaned against a boulder to let me catch my breath and cool off a little in what shadow there was. We could see miles and miles across the country—so far that the mountains on the other side of Desolation Valley were swimmy pale against the sky. Below us, almost at our feet because of the steepness of the hill, was the thin green line of mesquites and river willows that bordered Chuckawalla River and, hidden in a clump of cottonwoods down to our left, was our cabin where Mama, if she had finished mixing the bread, was probably standing in the doorway with Merry on her hip, looking up as I was looking down.

"What if there isn't a spring?" I asked, gulping dryly, wanting a drink. I thought Father wasn't going to answer. Sometimes he doesn't—maybe for a day or so. Then suddenly, when you aren't even thinking of the same thing, he'll answer and expect you to remember what you'd asked.

"Then we'll know why they call this Sometime Creek," he said. "If you've cooled down some, go get a drink."

"But we've always got the river," I said, as I bellied down to the edge of the plunging water. It flowed so fast that I couldn't suck it up. I had to bite at it to get a mouthful. It was cold and tasted of silt. It was shallow enough that I bumped my nose as I ducked my hot face into its coldness.

"Not always." Father waited until I finished before he cupped his hands in a small waterfall a step upstream and drank briefly. "It's dropped to less than half its flow of last week. Tanker told me yesterday when he stopped for melons that there's no snow left in the Coronas Atlas, this early in the summer."

"But our orchard!" I felt dread crawl in my stomach. "All our fields!"

"Our orchard," said Father, no comfort or reassurance in his voice. "And all our fields."

We didn't find a spring. We stood at the bottom of a slope too steep to climb and watched the water sheet down it from the top we couldn't see. I watched Father as he stood there, one foot up on the steep rise, his knee bent as if he intended to climb up sheer rock, looking up at the silver falling water.

"If the river dries up," I offered, "The creek isn't enough to water everything."

Father said nothing but turned back down the hill.

We went down in half the time it took us to climb. Part way down I stumbled and fell sideways into a catclaw bush. Father had to pull me out, the tiny thorns clinging to my clothes like claws and strip-

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ing the backs of my hands and one of my cheeks with smarting scratches.

"People have to drink," said Father. "And the animals."

We were leveling out on the flat by the house when I finally figured out what Father meant. He had already given our young orchard back to the wilderness and turned his back on the vegetable crops that were our mainstay and on the withering alfalfa fields. He was measuring water to keep us alive and still clinging to Fool's Acres Ranch.

Mama and Merry met us as we came down the path. I took the burden of Merry and carried her on down to the house. I wasn't supposed to know that Mama was going to have a baby in a couple of months. Boys aren't supposed to notice such things—not even boys who are past fifteen and so almost men.

That night we sat around the table as usual and read to each other. I read first. I was reading *Robinson Crusoe* for the second time since we came to the ranch and I had just got to where he was counting his wheat seeds and figuring out the best way to plant them. I liked this part better than the long, close pages where he talks philosophy about being alone and uses big, hard to pronounce words. But sometimes, looking out across the plains and knowing there is only Father and Mama and Merry and me as far as my eye can reach, I knew how he felt. Well, maybe the new baby would be a boy.

I read pretty well. Father didn't have to correct my pronunciation very often. Then Mama read from *Sense and Sensibility* and I listened even if it was dull and sleepy to me. You never know when Father is going to ask you what a word means and you'd better have some idea!

Then Father read from *Plutarch's Lives* which is fun sometimes, and we ended the evening with our Bible verses and prayers.

I was half asleep before the lamp was blown out, but I came wide awake when I heard Mama's low carrying voice.

"Maybe mining would have been better. This is good mining country."

"Mining isn't for me," said Father. "I want to take living things from the earth. I can feel that I'm part of growing things, and nothing speaks to me of God more than seeing a field ripening ready for harvest. To have food where only a few months before was only a handful of seed—and faith."

"But if we finally have to give the ranch up anyway—" Mama began faintly.

"We won't give it up." Father's voice was firm.

Father and I rode in the sup-

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ply wagon from Raster Creek Mine over the plank bridge across the dwindling thread of the river to our last gate. I opened the gate, wrestling with the wire loop holding the top of the post while Father thanked Mr. Tanker again for the newspapers he had brought us. "I'm sorry there is so little for you this time," he said, glancing back at the limp gunny sacks and half-empty boxes. "And it's the last of it all."

Mr. Tanker gathered up the reins. "Reckon now you're finding out why this is called Fool's Acres Ranch. You're the third one that's tried farming here. This is mining country. Never be nothing else. No steady water. Shame you didn't try in Las Lomitas Valley across the Coronas. Artesian wells there. Every ranch got two-three wells and ponds with trees and fish. Devil of a long way to drive for fresh garden truck, though. Maybe if we ever get to be a state instead of a territory—"

Father and I watched him drive away, the wagon hidden in dust before it fairly started. We walked back to the planks across the stream and stopped to look at the few pools tied together with a thread of water brought down by Sometime Creek that was still flowing thinly. Father finally said, "What does Las Lomitas mean in English?" And I wrestled with what little Spanish I had learned until that evening at the table. I grinned to myself as I said, "It means 'The Little Hills'," and watched Father, for a change, sort through past conversations to understand what I was talking about.

Mama's time was nearing and we were all worried. Though, as I said, politeness had it that I wasn't supposed to know what was going on. But I knew about the long gap between Merry and me—almost fourteen years. Mama had borne and buried five children in that time. I had been as healthy as a horse, but after me none of the babies seemed able to live. Oh, maybe a week or so, at first, but finally only a faint gasp or two and the perfectly formed babies died. And all this back East where there were doctors and midwives and comfort. I guess Mama gave up after the fifth baby died, because none came along until after we moved to Fool's Acres. When we knew Merry was on the way, I could feel the suspense building up. I couldn't really remember all those other babies because I had been so young. They had come each year regularly after me. But it had been ten years between the last one and Merry. So when Merry was born out in the wilderness with Father for midwife, none of us dared breathe heavily for fear she'd die. But she was like me—big lungs, big appetite and no idea of the difference between day and night.

Mama couldn't believe it for a

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long time and used to turn suddenly from her work and go touch Merry, just to be sure.

And now another baby was almost due and dust and desolation had settled down on the ranch and the whole area except for our orchard. Father explained the upside-down running of the rivers in a desert area that was, so far, keeping our young trees alive.

Anyway, there came a day that I took the water bucket and went to find a new dipping place because our usual one where the creek flowed into the river was so shallow even a tin dipper scooped up half sand at each attempt.

I had started up Sometime Creek hoping to find a deeper pool and had just stopped to lean in the thin hot shade of a boulder when it came.

Roaring! Blazing! A locomotive across the sky! A swept-back fountain of fire! A huge blazing something that flaked off flames as it roared away across Desolation Valley!

Scared half to death, I crouched against my boulder, my eyes blinking against the violence and thundering speed, my front hair fairly frizzling into beads from the impression of heat. Some of the flames that flaked off the main blaze blackened as they zig-zagged down out of the sky like bits of charred paper from a bonfire. But some flakes darted away like angry hornets and one—one flame that kept its shape as it blackened and plunged like an arrow down through the roaring skies—headed straight for me! I threw my arms up to shield my face and felt something hit below me with a swishing thud that shook the hill and me.

And stillness came back to the ranch.

Only a brief stillness. I heard the crackle of flames and saw the smoke plume up! I scrambled down-hill to the flat, seeing, like lightning, the flames racing across our cinder-dry fields, over our house, through our young orchard, across the crisped grass of Desolation Valley, leaving nothing but a smudge on the sky and hundreds of miles of scorched earth. It had happened other places in dry years.

I skidded to a stop in the edge of the flames, and, for lack of anything else I could do, I started stamping the small licking tongues of flame and kicking dirt over them.

"Barney!" I heard Father's shout. "Here's a shovel!"

I knuckled the smoke tears out of my eyes and stumbled to meet him as he ran towards me. "Keep it from going up the hill!" And he sped for the weed-grown edge of the alfalfa field.

Minutes later I plopped sand over the last smoking clump of grass and whacked it down with the back of my shovel. We were lucky. The fire area was pretty well contained between the rise of the

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hill and the foot of the field. I felt soot smudge across my face as I backhanded the sweat from my forehead. Father was out of my sight around the hill. Helting the shovel, I started around to see if he needed my help. There was another plume of smoke! Alerted, I dropped the point of my shovel. Then I let it clatter to the ground as I fell to my knees.

A blackened hand reached up out of a charred bundle! Fingers spread convulsively then clenched! And the bundle rolled jerkily.

"Father!" I yelled. "Father!" And grabbed for the smoldering blackness. I stripped away handsful of the scorching stuff and, by the time Father got there, my hands were scorching, too.

"Careful! Careful!" Father cautioned. "Here, let me." I moved back, nursing my blistered fingers. Father fumbled with the bundle and suddenly it ripped from one end to the other and he pulled out, like an ear of corn from its shuck, the twisting body of a person!

"He's badly burned," said Father. "Face and hands. Help me lift him." I helped Father get the body into his arms. He staggered and straightened. "Go tell your mother to brew up all the tea we have in the house—strong!" I raced for the house, calling to Mama as soon as I saw her anxious face, "Father's all right! I'm all right! But we found someone burned! Father says to brew up all our tea—strong!"

Mama disappeared into the cabin and I heard the clatter of stove lids. I hurried back to Father and hovered anxiously as he laid his burden down on the little front porch. Carefully we peeled off the burned clothes until finally we had the body stripped down and put into an old night shirt of Father's. The fire hadn't got to his legs nor to his body, but his left shoulder was charred—and his face! And arms! A tight cap thing that crumpled to flakes in our hands had saved most of his hair.

Father's mouth tightened. "His eyes," he said. "His eyes."

"Is he dead?" I whispered. Then I had my answer as one blackened hand lifted and wavered. I took it carefully in mine, my blisters drawing as I closed my fingers. The blackened head rolled and the mouth opened, soundlessly and closed again, the face twisting with pain.

We worked over the boy—maybe some older than I—all afternoon. I brought silty half-bucket after half-bucket of water from the dipping place and strained it through muslin to get the silt out. We washed the boy until we located all his burns and flooded the places with strong cold tea and put tea packs across the worst ones. Mama worked along with us until the burden of the baby made her breathless and she had to stop.

She had given Merry a piece of bread and put her out in the little

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porch-side pen when we brought the boy in. Merry was crying now, her face dabbled with dirt, her bread rubbed in the sand. Mama gathered her up with an effort and smiled wearily at me over her head. "I'd better let her cry a little more, then her face will be wet enough for me to wash it clean!"

I guess I got enough tea on my hands working with the boy that my own burns weren't too bad. Blisters had formed and broken, but I only needed my right thumb and forefinger bandaged with strips from an old petticoat of Mama's. We left Mama with the boy, now clean and quiet on my cot, his face hidden under the wet packs, and went slowly down the path I had run so many times through the afternoon. We took our buckets on past the dipping place where a palm-sized puddle was all that was left of the water, and retraced our steps to where the fire had been.

"A meteor?" I asked, looking across the ashy ground. "I always thought they came only at night."

"You haven't thought the matter over or you'd realize that night and day has nothing to do with meteors," said Father. "Is meteor the correct term?"

"How funny that that fellow happened to be at the exact place at the exact time the piece of the meteor hit here," I said, putting Father's question away for future reference.

" 'Odd' is a better word," Father corrected. "Where did the boy come from?"

I let my eyes sweep the whole wide horizon before us. No one on foot and alone could ever have made it from *any* where! Where had he come from? Up out of the ground? Down out of the sky?

"I guess he rode in on the meteor," I said, and grinned at the idea. Father blinked at me, but didn't return my smile.

"There's what set the fire," he said. We plopped through feathery ashes toward a black lump of something.

"Maybe we could send it to a museum," I suggested as we neared it. "Most meteors burn up before they hit the ground."

Father pushed the chunk with his foot. Flame flared briefly from under it as it rocked, and a clump of grass charred, the tips of the blades twisting and curling as they shriveled.

"Still hot," said Father, hunkering down on his heels beside it. He thumped it with a piece of rock. It clanged. "Metal!" His eyebrows raised, "Hollow!"

Carefully we probed with sticks from the hillside and thumped with rocks to keep our hands from the heat. We sat back and looked at each other. I felt a stir of something like fear inside me.

"It's—it's been made!" I said. "It's a long metal pipe or something! And I'll bet he was inside

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it! But how could he have been? How could he get so high in the sky as to come down like that? And if this little thing has been made, what was the big thing it came from?"

"I'll go get water," said Father, getting up and lifting the buckets. "Don't burn yourself any more."

I prodded the blackened metal. "Out of the sky," I said aloud. "As high and as fast as a meteor to get that hot. What was he doing up there?" My stick rocked the metal hulk and it rolled again. The split ends spread as it turned and a small square metal thing fell out into the ashes. I scraped it to one side and cautiously lifted it. The soot on it blackened my bandanges and my palms. It looked like a box and was of a size that my two hands could hold. I looked at it, then suddenly overwhelmed and scared by the thought of roaring meteors and empty space and billowing grass fires, I scratched a hasty hole against a rock, shoved the box in and stamped the earth over it. Then I went to meet Father and take one of the dripping buckets from him. We didn't look back at the crumpled metal thing behind us.

Father could hardly believe his eyes when he checked the boy's burns next morning. "They're healing already!" he said to Mama, "Look!"

I crowded closer to see, too, almost spilling the olive oil we were using on him. I looked at the boy's left wrist where I remembered a big, raw oozing place just where the cuff of his clothes had ended. The wrist was dry now and covered with the faint pink of new skin.

"But his face," said Mama. "His poor face and his eyes!" She turned away, blinking tears, and reached for a cup of water. "He must have lots of liquids," she said, matter-of-factly.

"But if he's unconscious—" I clutched at my few lessons in home care of the sick.

Father lifted the boy's head and shoulders carefully, but even his care wasn't gentle enough. The boy moaned and murmured something. Father held the cup to his blistered mouth and tipped the water to the dry lips. There was a moment's pause, then the water was gulped eagerly and the boy murmured something again.

"More?" asked Father clearly, "More?"

The face rolled to him then away and there was no answer.

"He'll need much care for a while," Father said to Mama as they anointed his burns and put on fresh bandages. "Do you think you can manage under the circumstances?"

Mama nodded. "With Barney to help with the lifting."

"Sure I'll help," I said. Then to Father, "Should I have said meteorite?"

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He nodded gravely. Then he said, "There are other planets." And left me to digest that one!

Father was spending his days digging for water in the river bottom. He had located one fair-sized pool that so far was keeping our livestock watered. We could still find drinking water for us up Sometime Creek. But the blue shimmer of the sky got more and more like heated metal. Heat was like a hand, pressing everything under the sky down into the powdery dead ground.

The boy was soon sitting up and eating a little of the little we had. But still no word from him, not a sound, even when we changed the dressings on his deeply charred left shoulder, or when the scabs across his left cheek cracked across and bled.

Then, one day, when all of us had been out of the cabin, straining our eyes prayerfully at the faint shadow of a cloud I thought I had seen over the distant Coronas, we came back, disheartened, to find the boy sitting in Mama's rocker by the window. But we had to carry him back to the cot. His feet seemed to have forgotten how to make steps.

Father looked down at him lying quietly on the cot. "If he can make it to the window, he can begin to take care of his own needs. Mother is overburdened as it is."

So I was supposed to explain to him that there would be no more basin for his use, but that the chamberpot under the cot was for him! How do you explain to someone who can't see and doesn't talk and that you're not at all sure even hears you?

"Come on, fellow," I said to him, glad we had the cabin to ourselves. I tugged at his unscarred right arm and urged him until, his breath catching between clenched teeth, he sat up and swung his feet over the cot edge. His hand went out to me and touched my cheek. His bandaged face turned to me and his hand faltered. Then quickly he traced my features—my eyes, my nose, my ears, across my head and down to my shoulders. Then he sighed a relieved sigh and both his hands went out to rest briefly on my two shoulders. His mouth distorted in a ghost of a smile, and he touched my wrist.

"What did you expect?" I laughed. "Horns?"

Then I sat back, astonished, as his finger tip probed my temple just where I had visualized a horn, curled twice and with a shiny black tip.

"Well!" I said, "Mind-reader!"

Just then Mama and Father came back into the cabin. The boy lay down slowly on the cot. Oh, well, the explanations could wait until the need arose.

We ate supper and I helped Mama clear up afterwards. I was bringing the evening books to the

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pool of light on the table around the lamp when a movement from the cot drew my eyes. The boy was sitting on the edge, groping to come to his feet. I hurried to him, wondering what to do with Mama in the room, then as I reached for the boy's arm, I flicked a glance at Father. My mouth opened to wonder how I had known what the boy wanted and how *he* knew about the Little House outside. But a hand closed on my arm and I moved towards the door with the boy. The door closed behind us with a *chuck*. Through the starry darkness we moved down the path to the Little House. He went in. I waited by the door. He emerged and we went back up the path and into the house. He eased himself down on the cot, turned his face away from the light and became quiet.

I wet my astonished lips and looked at Father. His lips quirked. "You're some mother cat!" he said.

But Mama wasn't smiling as I slid into my place at the table. Her eyes were wide and dark. "But he *didn't* touch the floor, James! And he didn't take one single step! He —he floated!"

Not one single step! I swiftly reviewed our walk and I couldn't remember the rhythm of any steps at all—except my own. My eyes questioned Father but he only said, "If he's to mingle with us, he must have a name."

"Timothy," I said instantly.

"Why Timothy?" asked Father.

"Because that's his name," I said blankly, "Timothy."

After a while Timothy came to the table to eat, dressed in some of my clothes. He was wonderfully at ease with knife and fork and spoon though his eyes were still scabbed over and hidden behind bandages. Merry babbled to him happily, whacking at him with her spoon, her few words meaning as much to him as all our talking, which apparently was nothing. He labored at making his feet take steps again and Mama didn't have his stepless-ness to worry about any more. He sat with us during our evening readings with no more response than if we sat in silence. Except that after the first evening he joined us, his right hand always made some sort of sign in the air at the beginning and end of our prayer time. His left arm wasn't working yet because of the deep burns on his shoulder.

Though Mama's worries over Timothy's steplessness were over, I had all kinds of worries to take my mind off the baking, dust-blown fields outside and even off the slow, heart-breaking curling of the leaves on our small orchard trees. I was beginning to hear things. Well, not hear things because there were no words, but to know things. I began to know when Timothy was thirsty or when he wanted to go to the Little House. I began to know what food he

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wanted more of and what he didn't care for. And it scared me. I didn't want to know—not without words.

Then Mama's time came. When at last the pains were coming pretty close together, Father sent me with Timothy and Merry away from the house, away from the task the two had before them. I knew the worry they had plaguing them besides the ordinary worry of childbirth and I prayed soundlessly as I lifted Merry and herded Timothy before me out to our orchard. And when my prayers tripped over their own anxiety and dissolved into wordlessness, I talked.

I told Timothy all about the ranch and the orchard and how Father had found me the other night pouring one of my cups of drinking water on the ground by my favorite smallest tree and how he'd told me it wouldn't help because the roots were too deep for so little water to reach. And I talked about all the little dead babies and how healthy Merry was but how worried we were for the new baby. And—and—well, I babbled until I ran out of words and sat under my dying favorite, shivering in the heat and hugging Merry. I pushed my face against her tumbled hair so no one could see my face puckering for tears. After I managed to snuff them back, I looked up and blinked.

Timothy was gone. He was streaking for the house, with not even one step! His feet were skimming above the furrows in the orchard. His arms were out in front of him like a sleep-walker but he was threading between the trees as though he could see. I started after him, fumbling with Merry who was sliding out of my arms, leaving her crumpled clothes behind, her bare legs threshing and her cries muffling in her skirts. I snatched her up more securely and, shucking her dress down around her as I ran, dropped her into her porch-pen. Timothy was fumbling at the door latch. I opened it and we went into the house.

Father was working over a small bundle on the scrubbed kitchen table. Timothy crouched by Mama's bed, his hands holding one of hers tightly. Mama's breath was quieting down in shuddering gulps. She turned her face and pressed her eyes against her free wrist. "It hasn't cried," she whispered hopelessly, "Why doesn't it cry?"

Father turned from the table, his whole body drooping. "It never even breathed, Rachel. It's perfectly formed, but it never breathed at all."

Mama stared up at the roof of the cabin. "The clothes are in the trunk," she said quietly, "And a pink blanket."

And Father sent me out to find a burying place.

The light went out of our house. We went the weary round of things that had to be done to keep living

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and even Merry stood quietly, her hands on the top board of her porch-pen, her wide eyes barely over-topping it and stared out at the hillside for long stretches of time. And Father, who had always been an unmoved mainstay no matter what happened, was broken, silent and uncommunicating.

We seldom mentioned the baby. We had buried my hoped-for little brother up on the hill under a scrub oak. When Mama was well enough, we all went up there and read the service for the dead, but no one cried as we stood around the tiny, powdery-dry, naked little grave. Timothy held Mama's hand all the way up there and all the way back. And Mama half smiled at him when we got back to the house.

Father said quietly, as he laid down the prayer book, "Why must he hang onto you?" Mama and I were startled at his tone of voice.

"But, James," Mama protested. "He's blind!"

"How many things has he bumped into since he's been up and around?" asked Father. "How often has he spilled food or groped for a chair?" He turned a bitter face towards Timothy. "And hanging onto you, he doesn't have to see—" Father broke off and turned to the window.

"James," Mama went to him quickly, "Don't make Timothy a whipping boy for your sorrow. God gave him into our keeping. 'The Lord giveth—' "

"I'm sorry, Rachel," Father gathered Mama closely with one arm. "This 'taking away' period is bad. Not only the baby—"

"I know," said Mama. "But when Timothy touches me, the sorrow is lessened and I can feel the joy—"

"Joy!" Father spun Mama away from his shoulder. I shook for the seldom seen anger in his face.

"James!" said Mama, " 'Weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning'. Let Timothy touch your hand—"

Father left the house without a glance at any of us. He gathered up Merry from the porch-pen and trudged away through the dying orchard.

That night, while Mama was reading, I got up to get Timothy a drink.

"You're interrupting your mother," said Father quietly.

"I'm sorry," I said, "Timothy is thirsty."

"Sit down," said Father ominously. I sat.

When our evening was finished, I asked, "May I get him a drink now?"

Father slowly sat down again at the table. "How do you know he wants a drink?" he asked.

"I—I just know," I stumbled watching Timmy leave the table. "It comes into my mind."

"Comes into your mind." Father seemed to lay the words out on the

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table in front of him and look at them. After a silence he said, "How does it come into your mind? Does it say, Timothy is thirsty—he wants a drink?"

"No," I said, unhappily, looking at Father's lamplight-flooded face, wondering if he was, for the first time in my life, ridiculing me. "There aren't any words. Only a feeling—only a *knowing* that he's thirsty."

"And you." His face shadowed as he turned it to look at Mama. "When he touches your hand, are there words—Joy, have joy?"

"No," said Mama. "Only the feeling that God is over all and that sorrow is a shadow and that—that the baby was called back into the Presence."

Father turned back to me. "If Timothy can make you know he is thirsty, he can tell you he is. You are not to give him a drink until he asks for it."

"But Father! He can't talk!" I protested.

"He has a voice," said Father. "He hasn't talked since he became conscious after the fire, but he said some words before then. Not our words, but words. If he can be blind and still not stumble, if he can comfort a bereaved mother by the touch of the hand, if he can make you know he's thirsty, he can talk."

I didn't argue. You don't with Father. They started getting ready for bed. I went to Timothy and sat beside him on the cot. He didn't put out his hand for the cup of water he wanted. He knew I didn't have it.

"You have to ask for it," I told him. "You have to say you're thirsty." His blind face turned to me and two of his fingers touched my wrist. I suddenly realized that this was something he often did lately. Maybe being blind he could hear better by touching me. I felt the thought was foolish before I finished it. But I said again, "You have to ask for it. You must tell me, 'I'm thirsty. I want a drink, please.' You must talk."

Timothy turned from me and lay down on the cot. Mama sighed sharply. Father blew out the lamp, leaving me in the dark to spread my pallet on the floor and go to bed.

The next morning we were all up before sunrise. Father had all our good barrels loaded on the hay-rack and was going to Tolliver's Wells for water. He and Mama counted out our small supply of cash with tight lips and few words. In times like these water was gold. And what would we do when we had no more money?

We prayed together before Father left, and the house felt shadowy and empty with him gone. We pushed our breakfasts around our plates and then put them away for lunch.

What is there to do on a ranch that is almost dead? I took *Pilgrims*

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Progress to the corner of the front porch and sat with it on my lap and stared across the yard without seeing anything, sinking into my own Slough of Despond. I took a deep breath and roused a little as Timothy came out onto the porch. He had a cup in his hand.

"I'm thirsty," he said slowly but distinctly, "I want a drink, please."

I scrambled awkwardly to my feet and took the cup from him. Mama came to the door. "What did you say, Barney?"

"I didn't say anything," I said, my grin almost splitting my face. "Timmy did!" We went into the house and I dipped a cup of water for Timmy.

"Thank you," he said and drank it all. Then he put the cup down by the bucket and went back to the porch.

"He could have got the drink himself," Mama said wonderingly, "He can find his way around. And yet he waited, thirsty, until he could ask you for it."

"I guess he knows he has to mind Father, too!" I laughed shakily.

It was a two days round-trip to Tolliver's Wells and the first day stretched out endlessly. In the heat of noon, I slept, heavily and unrefreshingly. I woke, drenched with sweat, my tongue swollen and dry from sleeping with my mouth open. I sat up, my head swimming and my heart thumping audibly in my ears. Merry and Mama were still sleeping on the big bed, a mosquito bar over them to keep the flies off. I wallowed my dry tongue and swallowed. Then I staggered up from my pallet. Where was Timothy?

Maybe he had gone to the Little House by himself. I looked out the window. He wasn't in sight and the door swung half open. I waited a minute but he didn't come out. Where was Timothy!

I stumbled out onto the front porch and looked around. No Timothy. I started for the barn, rounding the corner of the house, and there he was. He was sitting on the ground, half in the sun, half in the shade of the house. He had the cup in one hand and the fingers of the other hand were splashing in the water. His blind face was intent.

"Timmy!" I cried, and he looked up with a start, water slopping. "Daggone! You had me scared stiff! What are you doing with that water?" I slid to a seat beside him. His two wet fingers touched my wrist without fumbling for it. "We don't have enough water to play with it!"

He turned his face down toward the cup, then, turning, he poured the water carefully at the bottom of the last geranium left alive of all Mama had taken such tender care of.

Then, with my help, he got to his feet and because I could tell what he wanted and because he said, "Walk!" we walked. In all

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that sun and dust we walked. He led me. I only went along for the exercise and to steer him clear of cactus and holes in the way. Back and forth we went, back and forth. To the hill in front of the house, back to the house. To the hill again, a little farther along. Back to the yard, missing the house about ten feet. Finally, halfway through the weary monotony of the afternoon, I realized that Timmy was covering a wide area of land in ten-foot swaths, back and forth, farther and farther from the house.

By evening we were both exhausted and only one of Timmy's feet was even trying to touch the ground. The other one didn't bother to try to step. Finally Timmy said, "I'm thirsty. I want a drink, please." And we went back to the house.

Next morning I woke to see Timmy paddling in another cup of water and all morning we covered the area on the other side of the house, back and forth, back and forth.

"What *are* you doing?" Mama had asked.

"I don't know," I said. "It's Timmy's idea." And Timmy said nothing.

When the shadows got short under the bushes we went back to the porch and sat down on the steps, Merry gurgling at us from her porch-pen.

"I'm thirsty. I want a drink, please," said Timmy again and I brought him his drink. "Thank you," he said, touching my wrist. "It's sure hot!"

"It sure is!" I answered, startled by his new phrase. He drank slowly and poured the last drop into his palm. He put the tin cup down on the porch by him and worked the fingers and thumb of his other hand in the dampness of his palm, his face intent and listening-like under his bandaged eyes.

Then his fingers were quiet and his face turned towards Merry. He got up and took the two steps to the porch-pen. He reached for Merry, his face turned to me. I moved closer and he touched my wrist. I lifted Merry out of the pen and put her on the porch. I lifted the pen, which was just a hollow square of wooden rails fastened together, and set it up on the porch, too.

Timmy sat down slowly on the spot where the pen had been. He scraped the dirt into a heap then set it to one side and scraped again. Seeing that he was absorbed for a while, I took Merry in to be cleaned up for dinner and came back later to see what Timmy was doing. He was still scraping and had quite a hole by now, but the dirt was stacked too close so that it kept sliding back into the hole. I scraped it all away from the edge, then took his right arm and said, "Time to eat, Timmy. Come on."

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He ate and went back to the hole he had started. Seeing that he meant to go on digging. I gave him a big old spoon Merry sometimes played with and a knife with a broken blade, to save his hands.

All afternoon he dug with the tools and scooped the dirt out. And dug again. By evening he had enlarged the hole until he was sitting in it, shoulder deep.

Mama stood on the porch, sagging under the weight of Merry who was astride her hip and said, "He's ruining the front lawn." Then she laughed. "Front lawn! Ruining it!" And she laughed again, just this side of tears.

Later that evening, when what cooling-off ever came was coming over the ranch, we heard the jingle of harness and then the creak of the hayrack and the plop of horses' hooves in the dust.

Father was home! We ran to meet him at our gate, suddenly conscious of how out-of-step everything had been without him. I opened the gate and dragged the four strands wide to let the wagon through.

Father's face was dust coated and the dust did not crease into smiles for us. His hugs were almost desperate. I looked into the back of the wagon, as he and Mama murmured together. Only half the barrels were filled.

"Didn't we have enough money?" I asked, wondering how people could insist on hard metal in exchange for life.

"They didn't have water enough," said Father. "Others were waiting, too. This is the last they can let us have."

We took care of the horses but left the water barrels on the wagon. That was as good a place as any and the shelter of the barn would keep it—well, not cool maybe, but below the boiling point.

It wasn't until we started back to the house that we thought of Timmy. We saw a head rising from the hole Timmy was digging and Father drew back his foot to keep it from being covered with a handful of dirt.

"What's going on," he asked, letting his tiredness and discouragement sharpen his voice.

"Timmy's digging," I said, stating the obvious which was all I could do.

"Can't he find a better place than that?" And Father stomped into the house. I called Timmy and helped him up out of the hole. He was dirt-covered from head to heels and Father was almost through with his supper before I got Timmy cleaned up enough to come inside. We sat around the table, not even reading, and talked. Timmy sat close to me, his fingers on my wrist.

"Maybe the ponds will fill a little while we're using up this water," said Mama, hopelessly.

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Father was silent and I stared at the table, seeing the buckets of water Prince and Nig had sucked up so quickly that evening.

"We'd better be deciding where to go," said Father. "When the water's all gone—" His face shut down, bleak and still and he opened the Bible at random, missing our marker by half the book. He looked down and read, " 'For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.' " He clapped the book shut and sat, his elbows on each side of the book, his face buried in his two hands, this last rubbing of salt in the wound almost too much to bear.

I touched Timmy and we crept to bed.

I woke in the night, hearing a noise. My hand went up to the cot and I struggled upright. Timmy was gone. I scrambled to the door and looked out. Timmy was in the hole, digging. At least I guess he was. There was a scraping sound for a while then a—a *wad* of dirt would sail slowly up out of the hole and fall far enough from the edge that it wouldn't run down in again. I watched the dirt sail up twice more, then there was a clatter and three big rocks sailed up. They hovered a little above the mound of dirt then thumped down —one of them on my bare foot.

I was hopping around, nursing my foot in my hands, when I looked up and saw Father standing stern and tall on the porch.

"What's going on?" He repeated his earlier question. The sound of digging below stopped. So did my breath for a moment.

"Timmy's digging," I said, as I had before.

"At night?" What for?" Father asked.

"He can't see, night or light," I said, "But I don't know why he's digging."

"Get him out of there," said Father. "This is no time for nonsense."

I went to the edge of the hole. Timmy's face was a pale blur below. "He's too far down," I said. "I'll need a ladder."

"He got down there," said Father unreasonably, "Let him get out!"

"Timmy!" I called down to him. "Father says come up!"

There was a hesitating scuffle, then Timmy came up! Straight up! As though something were lifting him! He came straight up out of the hole and hovered as the rocks had, then he moved through the air and landed on the porch so close to Father that he stumbled back a couple of steps.

"Father!" My voice shook with terror.

Father turned and went into the house. He lighted the lamp, the up-flare of the flame before he put the chimney on showed the deep furrows down his cheeks. I prodded Timmy and we sat on the

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bench across the table from Father.

"Why is he digging?" Father asked again. "Since he responds to you, ask him."

I reached out, half afraid, and touched Timmy's wrist. "Why are you digging?" I asked, "Father wants to know."

Timmy's mouth moved and he seemed to be trying different words with his lips. Then he smiled, the first really truly smile I'd ever seen on his face. " 'Shall waters break out and streams in the desert'," he said happily.

"That's no answer!" Father exclaimed, stung by having those unfitting words flung back at him. "No more digging. Tell him so."

I felt Timmy's wrist throb protestingly and his face turned to me, troubled.

"Why no digging? What harm's he doing?" My voice sounded strange in my own ears and the pit of my stomach was ice. For the first time in my life I was standing up to Father! That didn't shake me as much as the fact that for the first time in my life I was seriously questioning his judgment.

"No digging because I said no digging!" said Father, anger whitening his face, his fists clenching on the table.

"Father," I swallowed with difficulty, "I think Timmy's looking for water. He—he touched water before he started digging. He felt it. We—we went all over the place before he settled on where he's digging. Father, what if he's a —a dowser? What if he knows where water is? He's different—"

I was afraid to look at Father. I kept my eyes on my own hand where Timmy's fingers rested on my wrist.

"Maybe if we helped him dig—" I faltered and stopped, seeing the stones come up and hover and fall. "He has only Merry's spoon and an old knife."

"And he dug that deep!" thundered Father.

"Yes," I said, "All by himself."

"Nonsense!" Father's voice was flat. "There's no water anywhere around here. You saw me digging for water for the stock. We're not in Las Lomitas. There will be no more digging."

"Why not!" I was standing now, my own fists on the table as I leaned forward. I could feel my eyes blaze as Father's do sometimes. "What harm is he doing? What's wrong with his keeping busy while we sit around waiting to dry up and blow away? What's wrong with hoping!"

Father and I glared at each other until his eyes dropped. Then mine filled with tears and I dropped back on the bench and buried my face in my arms. I cried as if I were no older than Merry. My chest was heavy with sorrow for this first real anger I had ever felt toward Father, with the shouting and the glaring, and

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especially for his eyes falling before mine.

Then I felt his hand heavy on my shoulder. He had circled the table to me. "Go to bed now," he said quietly. "Tomorrow is another day."

"Oh, Father!" I turned and clung to his waist, my face tight against him, his hand on my head. Then I got up and took Timmy back to the cot and we went to bed again.

Next morning, as though it was our usual task, Father got out the shovels and rigged up a bucket on a rope and he and I and Timmy worked in the well. We called it a well now, instead of a hole, maybe to bolster our hopes.

By evening we had it down a good twelve feet, still not finding much except hard, packed-down river silt and an occasional clump of round river rocks. Our ladder was barely long enough to help us scramble up out and the edges of the hole were crumbly and sifted off under the weight of our knees.

I climbed out. Father set the bucket aside and eased his palms against his hips. Timmy was still in the well, kneeling and feeling the bottom.

"Timmy!" I called. "Come on up. Time to quit!" His face turned up to me but still he knelt there and I found myself gingerly groping for the first rung of the ladder below the rim of the well.

"Timmy wants me to look at something," I said up to Father's questioning face. I climbed down and knelt by Timmy. My hands followed his tracing hands and I looked up and said, "Father!" with such desolation in my voice that he edged over the rim and came down, too.

We traced it again and again. There was solid rock, no matter which way we brushed the dirt, no matter how far we poked into the sides of the wall. We were down to bedrock. We were stopped.

We climbed soberly up out of the well. Father boosted me up over the rim and I braced myself and gave him a hand up. Timmy came up. There was no jarring of his feet on the ladder, but he came up. I didn't look at him.

The three of us stood there, ankle-deep in dust. Then Timmy put his hands out, one hand to Father's shoulder and one to mine. "'*Shall* waters break out and streams in the desert'," he said carefully and emphatically.

"Parrot!" said Father bitterly, turning away.

"If the water is *under* the stone!" I cried. "Father, we blasted out the mesquite stumps in the far pasture. Can't we blast the stone—"

Father's steps were long and swinging as he hurried to the barn. "I haven't ever done this except with stumps," he said. He sent Mama and Merry out behind

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the barn. He made Timmy and me stay away as he worked in the bottom of the well, then he scrambled up the ladder and I ran out to help pull it up out of the well and we all retreated behind the barn, too.

Timmy clung to my wrist and when the blast came, he cried out something I couldn't understand and wouldn't come with us back to the well. He crouched behind the barn, his face to his knees, his hands clasped over the top of his head.

We looked at the well. It was a dimple in the front yard. The sides had caved in. There was nothing to show for all our labor but the stacked-up dirt beside the dimple, our ladder, and a bucket with a rope tied to the pail. We watched as a clod broke loose at the top of the dimple and started a trickle of dirt as it rolled dustily down into the hole.

" 'And streams in the desert,' ", said Father, turning away.

I picked up the bucket, dumped out a splinter of stone and put the bucket carefully on the edge of the porch.

"Supper," said Mama quietly, sagging under Merry's weight.

I went and got Timmy. He came willingly enough. He paused by the dimple in the front yard, his hand on my wrist, then went with me into the shadowy cabin.

After supper I brought our evening books to the table, but Timmy put out seeking hands and gathered them to him. He put both hands, lapping over each other, across the top of the stack and leaned his chin on them, his face below the bandage thoughtful and still.

"I have words enough now," he said slowly. "I have been learning them as fast as I could. Maybe I will not have them always right, but I must talk now. You must not go away, because there *is* water."

Father closed his astonished mouth and said wearily, "So you have been making fools of us all this time!"

Timmy's fingers went to my wrist in the pause that followed Father's words. "I have not made fools of you," Timmy went on. "I could not speak to anyone but Barney without words, and I must touch him to tell and to understand. I had to wait to learn your words. It is a new language."

"Where are you from?" I asked eagerly, pulling the patient cork out of my curiosity. "How did you get out there in the pasture. What is in the—" Just in time I remembered that I was the only one who knew about the charred box.

"My *cahilla!*" cried Timmy—then he shook his head at me and addressed himself to Father. "I'm not sure how to tell you so you will believe. I don't know how far your knowledge—"

"Father's smarter than anyone in the whole Territory!" I cried.

"The Territory—" Timmy

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paused, measuring Territory. "I was thinking of your world—this world—"

"There are other planets—" I repeated Father's puzzling words.

"Then you *do* know other planets," said Timmy. "Do you—" he groped for a word. "Do you transport yourself and things in the sky?"

Father stirred. "Do we have flying machines?" he asked. "No, not yet. We have balloons—"

Timmy's fingers were on my wrist again. He sighed. "Then I must just tell and if you do not know, you must believe only because I tell. I tell only to make you know there *is* water and you must stay.

"My world is another planet. It *was* another planet. It is broken in space now, all to pieces, shaking and roaring and fire—and all gone." His blind face looked on desolation and his lips tightened. I felt hairs crisp along my neck. As long as he touched my wrist I could see! I couldn't tell you what all I saw because lots of it had no words I knew to put to it, but I saw!

"We had ships for going in Space," he said. I saw them, needle-sharp and shining, pointing at the sky and the heavy red-lit clouds. "We went into space before our Home broke. Our Home! Our—Home." His voice broke and he leaned his cheek on the stack of books. Then he straightened again.

"We came to your world. We did not know of it before. We came far, far. At the last we came too fast. We are not space travelers. The big ship that found your world got too hot. We had to leave it in our life-slips, each by himself. The life-slips got hot, too. I was burning! I lost control of my life-slip. I fell—" He put his hands to his bandages. "I think maybe I will never see this new world."

"Then there are others, like you, here on Earth," said Father slowly.

"Unless they all died in the landing," said Timmy. "There were many on the big ship."

"I saw little things shoot off the big thing!" I cried, excited. "I thought they were pieces breaking off only they—they *went* instead of falling!"

"Praise to the Presence, the Name and the Power!" said Timmy, his right hand sketching his sign in the air, then dropping to my wrist again.

"Maybe some live still. Maybe my family. Maybe Lytha—"

I stared, fascinated, as I saw Lytha, dark hair swinging, smiling back over her shoulder, her arms full of flowers whose centers glowed like little lights. Daggone! I thought, Daggone! She sure isn't his Merry!

"Your story is most interesting," said Father, "And it opens vistas we haven't begun to explore yet,

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but what bearing has all this on our water problem?"

"We can do things you seem not able to do," said Timmy. "You must always touch the ground to go, and lift things with tools or hands, and know only because you touch and see. We can know without touching and seeing. We can find people and metals and water —we can find almost anything that we know, if it is near us. I have not been trained to be a finder, but I have studied the feel of water and the—the—what it is made of—"

"The composition," Father supplied the word.

"The composition of water," said Timmy. "And Barney and I explored much of the farm. I found the water here by the house."

"We dug," said Father. "How far down is the water?"

"I am not trained," said Timmy humbly. "I only know it is there. It is water that you think of when you say 'Las Lomitas'. It is not a dipping place or—or a pool. It is going. It is pushing hard. It is cold." He shivered a little.

"It is probably three hundred feet down," said Father. "There has never been an artesian well this side of the Coronas."

"It is close enough for me to find," said Timmy. "Will you wait?"

"Until our water is gone," said Faither. "And until we have decided where to go.

"Now it's time for bed." Father took the Bible from the stack of books. He thumbed back from our place to psalms and read the "When I consider the heavens" one. As I listened, all at once the tight little world I knew, overtopped by the tight little Heaven I wondered about, suddenly split right down the middle and stretched and grew and filled with such a glory that I was scared and grabbed the edge of the table. If Timmy had come from another planet so far away that it wasn't even one we had a name for—! I knew that never again would my mind think it could measure the world—or my imagination, the extent of God's creation!

I was just dropping off the edge of waking after tumbling and tossing for what seemed like hours, when I heard Timmy.

"Barney," he whispered, not being able to reach my wrist. "My *cahilla*—You found my *cahilla?*"

"Your what?" I asked, sitting up in bed and meeting his groping hands. "Oh! That box thing. Yeah, I'll get it for you in the morning."

"Not tonight?" asked Timmy, wistfully. "It is all I have left of the Home."

"I can't find it tonight," I said. "I buried it by a rock. I couldn't find it in the dark. Besides, Father'd hear us go, if we tried to leave now. Go to sleep. It must be near morning."

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"Oh yes," sighed Timmy. "Oh yes." And he lay back down. "Sleep well."

And I did, going out like a lamp blown out, and dreamed wild, exciting dreams about riding astride ships that went sailless across waterless oceans of nothingness and burned with white hot fury that woke me up to full morning light and Merry bouncing happily on my stomach to wake me up.

After breakfast, Mama carefully oiled Timmy's scabs again. "I'm almost out of bandages," she said.

"If you don't mind having to see," said Timmy, "don't bandage me again. Maybe the light will come through."

We went out and looked at the dimple by the porch. It had subsided farther and was a bowl-shaped place now, maybe waist deep to me.

"Think it'll do any good to dig it out again?" I asked Father.

"I doubt it," he answered heavily. "Apparently I don't know how to set a charge to break the bedrock. How do we know we could break it anyway? It could be a mile thick right here." It seemed to me that Father was talking to me more like to a man than to a boy. Maybe I wasn't a boy anymore!

"The water is there," said Timmy. "If only I could *platt*—" His hand groped in the sun and it streamed through his fingers for a minute like sun through a knothole in a dusty room. I absently picked up the piece of stone I had dumped from the bucket last evening I fingered it and said, "Ouch!" I had jabbed myself on its sharp point. Sharp point!

"Look," I said, holding it out to Father. "This is broken! All the other rocks we found were round river rocks. Our blasting broke *something!*"

"Yes," Father took the splinter from me. "But where's the water?"

Timmy and I left Father looking at the well and went out to the foot of the field where the fire had been. I located the rock where I had buried the box. It was only a couple of inches down—barely covered. I scratched it out for him. "Wait," I said. "It's all black. Let me wipe it off first." I rubbed it in a sand patch and the black all rubbed off except in the deep lines of the design that covered all sides of it. I put it in his eager hands.

He flipped it around until it fitted his two hands with his thumbs touching in front. Then I guess he must have thought at it because he didn't do anything else but all at once it opened, cleanly, from his thumbs up.

He sat there on a rock in the sun and felt the things that were in the box. I couldn't tell you what any of them were except what looked like a piece of ribbon, and a withered flower. He finally closed the box. He slid to his knees be-

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side the rock and hid his face on his arms. He sat there a long time. When he finally lifted his face, it was dry, but his sleeves were wet. I've seen Mama's sleeves like that after she had looked at things in the little black trunk of hers.

"Will you put it back in the ground?" he asked. "There is no place for it in the house. It will be safe here."

So I buried the box again and we went back to the house.

Father had dug a little, but he said, "It's no use. The blast loosened the ground all around and it won't even hold the shape of a well any more."

We talked off and on all day about where to go from here, moneyless and perilously short of provisions. Mama wanted so much to go back to our old home that she couldn't talk about it, but Father wanted to go on, pushing West again. *I* wanted to stay where we were—with plenty of water. I wanted to see that tide of Time sweep one century away and start another across Desolation Valley! There would be a sight for you!

We began to pack that afternoon because the barrels were emptying fast and the pools were damp, curling cakes of mud in the hot sun. All we could take was what we could load on the hayrack. Father had traded the wagon we came west in for farm machinery and a set of washtubs. We'd have to leave the machinery either to rust there or for us to come back for.

Mama took Merry that evening and climbed the hill to the little grave under the scrub oak. She sat there a long time with her back to the sun, her wistful face in the shadow. She came back in silence, Merry heavily sleepy in her arms.

After we had gone to bed, Timmy groped for my wrist. "You do have a satellite to your earth, don't you?" he asked. His question was without words.

"A satellite?" Someone turned restlessly on the big bed when I hissed my question.

"Yes," he answered, "A smaller world that goes around and is bright at night."

"Oh," I breathed. "You mean the moon. Yes, we have a moon but it's not very bright now. There was only a sliver showing just after sunset." I felt Timmy sag. "Why?"

"We can do large things with sunlight and moonlight together," came his answer. "I hoped that at sunrise tomorrow—"

"At sunrise tomorrow, we'll be finishing our packing," I said. "Go to sleep."

"Then I must do without," he went on, not hearing me. "Barney, if I am Called, will you keep my *cahilla* until someone asks for it? If they ask, it is my People. Then they will know I am gone."

"Called?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"As the baby was," he said soft-

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ly, "Called back into the Presence from which we came. If I must lift with my own strength alone, I may not have enough, so will you keep my *cahilla?*"

"Yes," I promised, not knowing what he was talking about. "I'll keep it."

"Good. Sleep well," he said and again waking went out of me like a lamp blown out.

All night long I dreamed of storms and earthquakes and floods and tornadoes all going past me—fast! Then I was lying half awake, afraid to open my eyes for fear some of my dreaming might be true. And suddenly, it was!

I clutched my pallet as the floor humped, snapping and groaning, and flopped flat again. I heard our breakfast pots and pans banging on the shelf and then falling with a clatter. Mama called, her voice heavy with sleep and fear, "James! James!"

I reached for Timmy, but the floor humped again and dust rolled in through the pale squares of the windows and I coughed as I came to my knees. There was a crash of something heavy falling on the roof and rolling off. And a sharp hissing sound. Timmy wasn't in bed. Father was trying to find his shoes. The hissing noise got louder and louder until it was a burbling roar. Then there was a rumble and something banged the front of the house so hard I heard the porch splinter. Then there was a lot of silence.

I crept on all fours across the floor. Where was Timmy? I could see the front door hanging at a crazy angle on one hinge. I crept towards it.

My hands splashed! I paused, confused, and started on again. I was crawling in water! "Father!" My voice was a croak from the dust and shock. "Father! It's water!"

And Father was suddenly there, lifting me to my feet. We stumbled together to the front door. There was a huge slab of rock poking a hole in the siding of the house, crushing the broken porch under its weight. We edged around it, ankle deep in water, and saw in the grey light of early dawn our whole front yard awash from hill to porch. Where the well had been was a moving hump of water that worked away busily, becoming larger and larger as we watched.

"Water!" said Father. "The water has broken through!"

"Where's Timmy?" I said "*Where's Timmy!*" I yelled and started to splash out into the yard.

"Watch out!" warned Father. "It's dangerous! All this rock came out of there!" We skirted the front yard searching the surface of the rising water, thinking every shadow might be Timmy.

We found him on the far side of the house, floating quietly, face up in a rising pool of water, his

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face a bleeding mass of mud and raw flesh.

I reached him first, floundering through the water to him. I lifted his shoulders and tried to see in the dawn-light if he was still breathing. Father reached us and we lifted Timmy to dry land.

"He's alive!" said Father. "His face—it's just the scabs scraped off."

"Help me get him in the house," I said, beginning to lift him.

"Better be the barn," said Father. "The water's still rising." It had crept up to us already and seeped under Timmy again. We carried him to the barn and I stayed with him while Father went back for Merry and Mama.

It was lucky that most of our things had been packed on the hayrack the night before. After Mama, a shawl thrown over her nightgown and all our day clothes grabbed up in her arms, came wading out with Father who was carrying Merry and our lamp, I gave Timmy into her care and went back with Father again and again to finishing emptying the cabin of our possessions.

Already the huge rock had gone on down through the porch and disappeared into the growing pond of water in the front yard. The house was dipping to the weight of our steps as though it might float off the minute we left. Father got a rope from the wagon and tied it through the broken corner of the house and tethered it to the barn. "No use losing the lumber if we don't have to," he said.

By the time the sun was fully up, the house was floating off its foundation rocks. There was a pond filling all the house yard, back and front, extending along the hill, up to the dipping place, and turning into a narrow stream going the other way, following the hill for a while then dividing our dying orchard and flowing down toward the dry river bed. Father and I pulled the house slowly over toward the barn until it grated solid ground again.

Mama had cleaned Timmy up. He didn't seem to be hurt except for his face and shoulder being peeled raw. She put olive oil on him again and used one of Merry's petticoats to bandage his face. He lay deeply unconscious all of that day while we watched the miracle of water growing in a dry land. The pond finally didn't grow any wider, but the stream widened and deepened, taking three of our dead trees down to the river. The water was clearing now and was deep enough over the spring that it didn't bubble any more that we could see. There was only a shivering of the surface so that circles ran out to the edge of the pond.

Father went down with a bucket and brought it back brimming over. We drank the cold, cold water and Mama made a pack to put on Timmy's head.

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Timmy stirred but he didn't waken. It wasn't until evening when we were settling down to a scratch-meal in the barn that we began to realize what had happened.

"We have water!" Father cried suddenly, "Streams in the desert!"

"It's an artesian well, isn't it?" I asked. "Like at Las Lomitas. It'll go on flowing from here on out, won't it?"

"That remains to be seen," Father said, "But it looks like a good one. Tomorrow I must ride to Tolliver's Wells and tell them we have water. They must be almost out by now!"

"Then we don't have to move?" I asked.

"Not as long as we have water," said Father. "I wonder if we have growing time enough to put in a kitchen garden—"

I turned quickly. Timmy was moving. His hands were on the bandage, exploring it cautiously.

"Timmy," I reached for his wrist. "It's all right, Timmy. You just got peeled raw. We had to bandage you again."

"The—the water—" His voice was barely audible.

"It's all over the place!" I said. "It's floated the house off the foundations and you should see the pond! And the stream! And it's cold!"

"I'm thirsty," he said. "I want a drink, please."

He drained the cup of cold water and his lips turned upward in a ghost of a smile. "Shall waters break out!"

"Plenty of water," I laughed. Then I sobered. "What were you doing out in it, anyway?"

Mama and Father were sitting on the floor beside us now.

"I had to lift the dirt out," he said, touching my wrist. "All night I lifted. It was hard to hold back the loose dirt so it wouldn't slide back into the hole. I sat on the porch and lifted the dirt until the rock was there." He sighed and was silent for a minute. "I was not sure I had strength enough. The rock was cracked and I could feel the water pushing, hard, hard, under. I had to break the rock enough to let the water start through. It wouldn't break! I called on the Power again and tried and tried. Finally a piece came loose and flew up. The force of the water—it was like—like—blasting. I had no strength left. I went unconscious."

"You dug all that out alone!" Father took one of Timmy's hands and looked at the smooth palm.

"We do not always have to touch to lift and break," said Timmy. "But to do it for long and heavy takes much strength." His head rolled weakly.

"Thank you, Timothy," said Father. "Thank you for the well."

So that's why we didn't move. That's why Promise Pond is here

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to keep the ranch green. That's why this isn't Fool's Acres any more but Full Acres. That's why *Cahilla* Creek puzzles people who try to make it Spanish. Even Father doesn't know why Timmy and I named the stream *Cahilla*. The pond had almost swallowed up the little box before we remembered it.

That's why the main road across Desolation Valley goes through our ranch now for the sweetest, coldest water in the Territory. That's why our big new house is built among the young black walnut and weeping willow trees that surround the pond. That's why it has geraniums window-sill high along one wall. That's why our orchard has begun to bear a cash crop. And that's why, too, that one day a wagon coming from the far side of Desolation Valley made camp on the camping grounds below the pond.

We went down to see the people after supper to exchange news. Timmy's eyes were open now, but only light came into them, not enough to see by.

The lady of the wagon tried not to look at the deep scars on the side of Timmy's face as her man and we men talked together. She listened a little too openly to Timmy's part of the conversation and said softly to Mama, her whisper spraying juicily, "He your boy?"

"Yes, our boy," said Mama, "But not born to us."

"Oh," said the woman. "I thought he talked kinda foreign." Her voice was critical. "Seems like we're gettin' over-run with foreigners. Like that sassy girl in Margin."

"Oh?" Mama fished Merry out from under the wagon by her dress-tail.

"Yes," said the woman, "She talks foreign too, though they say not as much as she used to. Oh, them foreigners are smart enough! Her aunt says she was sick and had to learn to talk all over again, that's why she sounds like that." The woman leaned confidingly towards Mama, lowering her voice. "But I heard in a round-about way that there's something queer about that girl. I don't think she's really their niece. I think she came from some where else. I think she's really a foreigner!"

"Oh?" said Mama, quite unimpressed and a little bored.

"They say she does funny things and Heaven knows her name's funny enough. I *ask* you! Doesn't the way these foreigners push themselves in—"

"Where did your folks come from?" asked Mama, vexed by the voice the lady used for 'foreigner'.

The lady reddened. "*I'm* native born!" she said, tossing her head. "Just because my parents— It isn't as though England was—" She pinched her lips together. "Abigale Johnson for a name is a far cry

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from Marnie Lytha Something-or-other!"

Lytha! I heard Timmy's cry without words. *Lytha?* He stumbled toward the woman, for once his feet unsure. She put out a hasty hand to fend him off and her face drew up with distaste.

"Watch out!" she cried sharply. "Watch where you're going!"

"He's blind," Mama said softly.

"Oh," the woman reddened again. "Oh, well—"

"Did you say you knew a girl named Lytha?" asked Timmy faintly.

"Well, I never did have much to do with her," said the woman, unsure of herself. "I saw her a time or two—"

Timmy's fingers went out to touch her wrist and she jerked back as though burned. "I'm sorry," said Timmy. "Where are you coming from?"

"Margin," said the woman.

Timmy's hands shook a little as he turned away, "Thanks."

"Well, you're welcome, I guess," snapped the woman. She turned back to Mama who was looking after us, puzzled. "Now all the new dresses have—"

"I couldn't see," whispered Timmy to me as we moved off through the green grass and willows to the orchard. "She wouldn't let me touch her. How far is Margin?"

"Two days across Desolation Valley," I said, bubbling with excitement. "It's a mining town."

"Two days!" Timmy stopped and clung to a small tree. "Only two days away all this time!"

"It might not be your Lytha," I warned. "It could be one of us. I've heard some of the wildest names! Pioneering seems to addle people's naming sense."

"I'll call," said Timmy. "I'll call and when she answers—!"

"If she hears you," I said, knowing his calling wouldn't be aloud and would take little notice of the distance to Margin. "Maybe she thinks everyone is dead like you did. Maybe she won't think of listening."

"She will think often of the Home," said Timmy firmly, "And when she does, she will hear me. I will start now." And he threaded his way expertly through the walnuts and willows by the pond.

I looked after him and sighed. I wanted him happy and if it was his Lytha, I wanted them together again. But, if he called and called again and got no answer—

I slid to a seat on a rock by the pond, thinking again of the little lake we were planning where we would have fish and maybe a boat —I dabbled my hand in the cold water and thought, this was dust before Timmy came. He was stubborn enough to make the stream break through.

"If Timmy calls," I told a little bird balancing suddenly on a twig, bobbing over the water, "*Someone* will answer!"

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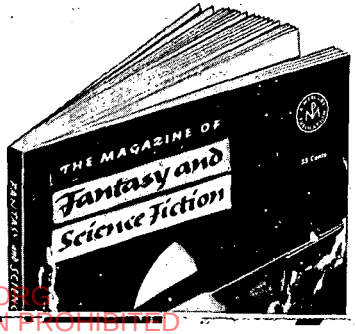

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